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MONTANA NAT, The Lion of Last Chance Camp.

A TALE OF LOVE AND TRAGEDY IN MONTANA.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "MISSISSIPPI MOSE," "BUCK FARLEY," "BILL, THE BLIZZARD," ETC., ETC.



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SHAKING HER PARASOL IN HIS FACE.

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CHAPTER I.

NAT TYRRELL MAKES AN ENEMY.

It was in the palmy days of Cheyenne, before that uproarious "camp" had settled down to a comparatively quiet, orderly and well-governed city.

It was then a collection of tents and shanties, of saloons and gambling-dens, where the revolver ruled and the bearded ruffian was at home.

Fortunes were rapidly made there in legitimate and illegitimate speculations, and no little money was lost in that paradise of keno and faro and poker.

Night had settled down on Cheyenne as on the rest of the hemisphere, but it was not a night of peace and quiet.

The saloons were open and brilliantly illuminated; the various games were in full blast; the rattle of the piano, the jingle of the tambourine and the squeak of the violin were abundantly heard; and shouts and oaths frequently rung out above the other noises, accompanied by the occasional crack of a revolver.

It was nearly two hours after midnight, but the lively inhabitants of Cheyenne showed no disposition to go to sleep.

From a saloon that blazed with light and reeked with the fumes of liquor emerged a party of half a dozen men, some of whom were so completely overcome that they clearly could not go much further unaided.

All were of the roughest of the rough—wild men who had started in for "a regular tearin' down time," but had succeeded in tearing themselves up, and had come out of the engagement in a ragged condition.

Those who still had "go" in them looked about for some new scheme for the exercise of their devilish propensities.

They soon found it.

From a concert saloon that was in the act of closing came a girl, or young woman, who was at once marked as lawful prey.

She was doubtless "no better than she should be," and her short dress and painted face bespoke her a singer in the saloon. She had thrown a shawl about her shoulders, and as she came out she drew a vail over her face.

Then she hastened away, not brazenly, but in a timid, shrinking way that showed a desire to escape the crowd and get out of sight.

"Thar's our game!" shouted the leader of the party of men. "Come, pard's, let's worry that cat!"

He led the chase, followed by such of his companions as were steady enough on their legs.

The girl shrieked and ran; but the big, brutal ruffian soon overtook her and laid his heavy hand on her shoulder.

"W'ot's yer hurry, sweetness?" he said, in tones that made her shudder and shrink away.

"We've been a-hearin' of yer singin', an' mebbe we mought strike a barg'in with yer fur a show of our own. W'ot d'yer say, pard's?"

"That's the ticket, Ben! We'll hire a hall an' give Cheyenne a show that'll bu'st her wide open."

"Please let me go, sir," pleaded the girl. "For mercy's sake let me go home. I am not at all well to-night, and am nearly ready to faint."

"Faint be blowed!" replied the man who had been addressed as Ben. "We'll faint yer eye-teeth out if you try to come that dodge over this crowd. You don't go nowhar but with us, an' you needn't think ye'r gwine to git off."

The girl struggled, and he laughed as he let her go and caught her again.

"Scatter that shawl!" he exclaimed. "Pull off that cussed vail, and let me see w'ot yer made of. You've got to dance a reel fur us right hyer, or git a dose that'll sicken yer fur six weeks."

"Please let me go!" sobbed the girl. "I can't dance. I can hardly stand. For mercy's sake let me go!"

"You don't go nowhar, missy. Put off that vail quick, or I'll tear it off!"

Was there no man in that party or within hearing, who was manly enough to remember his mother or sister, and take the part of that pleading girl?

Yes, there was a man within hearing who quickened his steps as the big ruffian uttered his last threat, and seized him by the collar as he raised his hand to pull the vail from the girl's face.

"Nat Tyrrell—Montana Nat!" exclaimed one of the rowdy party, and the name had a quieting effect upon the others.

The next moment the rough was forcibly

twisted around, and flung away from his victim.

He staggered back to confront his assailant, who was glaring at him angrily.

"Is this the sort of a game you play in Cheyenne, Ben Hatcher?" demanded the man. "Can you find no better business than torturing a poor girl, you big brute?"

"Better mind yer own business, Montana," retorted Ben Hatcher. "Close in on him, pard's, an' let's make a finish of this meddlin' galoot."

He put his hand on his pistol; but his companions did not seem to be anxious to second him.

"Don't dare to draw that!" warned Montana. "Will I have to give you another lesson, you cowardly scoundrel, such as I gave you at Beck's Station?"

"You won't give me no lesson," replied Hatcher—"nor nobody else—never, no more," and as he spoke, he jerked out his pistol and fired.

Quick as he was, Nat Tyrrell was quicker.

The two pistols seemed to make a simultaneous report; but Tyrrell's spoke a trifle the soonest. Being entirely sober, he was quicker in his motions than his half-muddled foe.

His bullet found the heart of Hatcher, whose leaden missile passed harmlessly over his shoulder.

The big brute fell dead, and his companions crowded around his lifeless form.

Tyrrell turned to look for the girl, but she was gone, and he quietly walked on.

The next day there was an investigation of the shooting, as there was law in Cheyenne as well as elsewhere; but it was mainly a matter of form, and Tyrrell went free on the plea of self-defense.

As he left the court-room he was accosted by a big man whose personal appearance was much like that of Ben Hatcher.

"You have killed my brother," said this man, "and you have got off here; but you won't get off from me."

"I am here now," calmly replied Tyrrell.

"Time enough. I will take you when I want you and where I want you, and will settle with you for my brother's death when I get ready."

"That means, I suppose, that you want to sneak up and shoot me in the back. Well, Rube Hatcher, you may do your worst. I killed your brother fairly, in self-defense, and I still know how to defend myself."

CHAPTER II.

ONE OF THEM FOUND.

AGAIN it was night—night on a vast prairie.

It was a dark, gloomy and disagreeable night. A chilly, misty, drizzling rain was falling, and a tall young man who was riding across the plain kept his coat buttoned up around his throat and the lock of his rifle covered.

The soaked prairie sobbed under his horse's feet, the moisture dripped from his broad felt hat, and now and then when he held down his head a small deluge poured upon his saddlebow.

He knew his course well, and kept it as if he were steering by a compass; but he naturally looked ahead, and once he fancied that he saw in the distance a small object that was darker than the darkness.

He rode on further, and looked again, and was sure that he was not mistaken. The dark object was really there.

Further he rode, and was convinced that the object was alive; for he distinctly saw it move.

What could it be but a human being? A coyote, the only beast that would be likely to be abroad, would not be visible at that distance.

If it was a human being, it must be afoot, and of course in distress. To be afoot on that prairie was nothing short of a calamity.

He spurred his horse forward, and rode at a good rate of speed over the soft and soaking sod.

As he approached the dark object he was sure that it was a human being, and soon he wondered could it possibly be a woman?

It surely looked like a woman; but how, in the name of reason, did a woman happen to be out on the prairie, at night, afoot and alone, so far from any habitation?

Was it really a woman?

Yes—it was a woman—a young woman, who would have been strikingly handsome if she had been well and strong and happy.

She was plainly and poorly dressed, and a shadow for thinness, looking as if it had been days since she tasted food. A hectic flush on her cheek only served to give effect to her extreme paleness, and the wild light in her eyes plainly told of a mind that had lost its balance.

There she was on the prairie, afoot and alone; but it was evident that she would not be able to go much further.

Sighing, but not sobbing, she struggled on, scarcely able to drag her feet along, while her drenched clothing hung about her and impeded her progress.

She saw the solitary horseman coming toward her, and she stopped, as if doubting whether he would prove to be a friend or foe.

But even her dazed wits perceived the uselessness of attempting to escape, and she seemed to conclude to accept the inevitable.

"It may be Marshall," she muttered.

Again she staggered on, but had not taken more than three steps when she abandoned the hopeless task, threw up her hands, waved them wildly, and fell prostrate on the wet ground.

The horseman had urged his horse to greater speed when he saw that a woman needed his assistance, and when she fell he again gave the powerful beast the spur.

He soon reached her, dismounted from his trained steed, and raised the drenched and helpless form in his arms.

As he brushed the wet hair from her pale face, a cry burst from his lips—a cry of amazement, of anguish, of horror.

"God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible? Can this be Rose?"

She had not fainted. It was extreme weakness that had left her in a condition bordering on insensibility, and at the sound of his voice she opened her eyes and stared at him.

"It is Rose!" he exclaimed. "To think that I should find her at last, and find her like this."

"It is not he," she murmured, faintly, closing her eyes again.

"Look up, Rose!" he besought her, while tears, real tears, fell upon his bronzed cheeks. "Don't you know me, my poor, dear sister? It is I, your brother, Nat Tyrrell."

"Yes, I know Nat Tyrrell," she answered, quickly. "Don't take me to him, whatever you do with me."

He took a flask of liquor from his pocket, and forced her to drink some of its contents.

This revived her, giving her strength for the moment, and she sat up, and again stared at him.

"How did you get here, Rose?" he tenderly asked her. "Where did you come from? Where were you trying to go to?"

"Rose?" she replied, with a faint smile.

"Yes, my name is Rose. I never forget my name. You must excuse me, sir. It has been raining, and I am wet. I am looking for him—for Marshall Walters. Perhaps you know him. He has lost me; but I am sure he is trying to find me."

"The scoundrel has deserted her, and I am afraid that she has lost her mind," muttered Tyrrell.

"It is strange that he has not found me," she said.

"But I have found you, thank the Lord! Whatever you may have done, my poor child, wherever you may have been, whatever has happened to you, my heart is always open to you, and the greater your misfortune has been, the greater will my love be."

She only stared at him.

"Don't you know me, Rose?" he exclaimed, in agony.

"I do not know you," she quietly replied, "and I am glad that I do not. I have been afraid that I might meet somebody I once knew."

"Look in my face, Rose. Look well and carefully. Is there nothing there that you remember?"

She did look in his face, closely and searching; but there was no gleam of recognition in her sad eyes.

"I never saw you before," she answered; "but you have a good face, and you are kind to me, and I will trust you."

"Come with me, then, and let me take you to a place of safety as soon as possible."

"I will, for it is too wet and cold out here. But you spoke of a man named Nat Tyrrell, and I will tell you a secret. He is my brother, and you must not take me to him or anywhere near him, whatever you do."

"Why not, Rose?"

"How did you learn my name? It is very strange that you know my name. Because I have heard that my brother has been looking for me, and he would kill me if he should find me. He is a handsome, dashing, high-spirited man, and he would never forgive me."

"Yes, her mind is gone," muttered Tyrrell.

"Oh, what a debt that scoundrel has to pay!"

"Promise me," she implored, "that you will not take me near him."

"I promise you that I will take you no nearer to him than you are now."

He made her drink again from his flask, raised her to her feet, and by a word brought his horse to his side.

He mounted while she clung to the saddle-skirt, and then he lifted her to the back of the horse where he had spread the dry side of a blanket.

"So light! so light!" he murmured, as he swung her up.

"This is the way I used to ride with my brother," she said, as she clasped her arms about his waist.

He groaned, and urged his horse forward as rapidly as her weak condition would allow.

When Nat Tyrrell had placed his unfortunate sister where he was assured that she would be safe and well cared for, he again turned his face westward, his heart filled with a dark determination.

"One of them is found," he muttered. "Now for the other! When I find that cussed scoundrel, I will murder him by inches, if I should swing for it as soon as the breath leaves his body!"

CHAPTER III.

AN UNPLEASANT PREDICAMENT.

MARK WEDDERBURN, manager and principal owner of the Last Chance Mine, was seated in the office of the company, when two persons stepped in.

They were not the sort of people that one would expect to see in that wild region or in a mining-camp anywhere, being a middle-aged man and a young woman, who looked as if they had unexpectedly emerged from the confines of Eastern civilization.

The man was a portly, cheery, red-faced gentleman, neatly attired in brown broadcloth, and having the appearance of a solid capitalist.

The young woman was dressed in the height of fashion, and decidedly overdressed, considering her surroundings. She wore a pair of gold-mounted eye-glasses, which may have been intended to give her the appearance of a young lady of intellect and culture.

"Good-morning, Abijah Duncome," said Mr. Wedderburn, as he rose to receive his guests. "I am very glad to see you."

"Same here, Mr. Wedderburn—same here. I have brought my darter in to make your acquaintance. This is Mr. Wedderburn, Celerity, the manager of the mine I am expecting to invest in."

Mr. Wedderburn was very polite, and the lady was very graceful in acknowledging the introduction.

"Pa gave me that horrid name, Mr. Wedderburn," said she, "and he persists in calling me by it, though he knows that I dislike it exceedingly. I suppose it suits him because he is such a fast man."

"What's in a name, Miss Duncome? A rose by any other name could not be any sweeter."

"Furty good for both of you," remarked Abijah Duncome. "I understand, friend Wedderburn, that you are in a fair way to straighten up the little tangle that Last Chance Mine has got into."

"Yes, sir. I think I have arranged the business satisfactorily."

"Did you give in to the strikers?"

"Not exactly; but I have got a new superintendent, and I believe him to be a first-class man, one who can be relied on to set things going right and keep them so."

"There is a great deal in a man, friend Wedderburn. There may be more in many men; but sometimes one man counts for quite a number. Who is this new superintendent, if it is a fair question?"

"His name is Tyrrell—Nat Tyrrell."

"Nat Tyrrell? Why, I think I know him."

"He is pretty well known as Montana Nat."

"Of course we know him, pa," interrupted the young lady. "It must be the man who rescued us from that very unpleasant predicament when our guide deserted us."

"What sort of an adventure was that?" inquired Mr. Wedderburn.

"A very disagreeable one, I assure you. But pa can tell you about it, if you care to hear it, better than I can."

"I ain't much of a hand at telling a story," replied Mr. Duncome, when he was appealed to, "but that thing got itself tied up in my memory, and I ain't apt to forget it. I had started from a station on the railroad to go and take a look at a mine some way off the line. My darter went with me, and we took a long-legged chap as a guide, Asa Picknell by name. Each of us had a hoss to ride, and we had a pack-mule along, loaded with provisions, and with Celerity's things, as she calls them."

"Night came on, and we camped in a piece of woods near the edge of a broad plain."

"I laid down and went to sleep, and so did my darter, and so did our colored man, John Randolph, leaving the guide to keep watch and take care of us."

"He did not take care of us," remarked Miss Duncome; "but he took something else."

"Jest so. Day was breaking when I woke, and I got up and rubbed my eyes and looked about; but not a sign did I see of our guide. I called him, but got no sort of an answer; and so far as I could see, our horses and the pack mule were missing, too."

"Then it began to dawn on me that we were in a kind of a scrape, and I set at work to rouse up John Randolph; but I tell you, Mr. Wedderburn, when a man undertakes to wake that darky out of a sound sleep he has got a heavy job on his hands."

"I got him to stirring at last, and when I had kinder hammered the case into his skull, he and I searched through the piece of woods, and found it empty of everything but ourselves. We saw where the hosses had been tethered, but there wasn't a hide or hoof of them left."

"By that time my darter had got awake, and she wanted to know what was the matter."

"I told her that we had met with a great disaster; that our guide had deserted us and carried off the hosses and all the portable property."

"She took it cool enough, and when I told her that there could be no doubt that Ace had gone off and left us, what do you think that girl said?"

"Something bright, I am sure," gallantly replied Mr. Wedderburn.

"She said that he must have been the ace of trumps, as he took everything."

"I am glad to see that she is able to be so jolly under difficulties."

"Well, that war a purty tough kind of a difficulty to be jolly under, and I told her it wasn't right for her to be talking about cards at such a time, 'specially as she had been a Sunday-school teacher to him."

"So she put on her eye-glasses and took a close view of the situation, as we say in politics; but it was a queer view she took of it."

"How so?" asked Mr. Wedderburn.

"She declared that it was a great deal more serious than I had any idea of, because her things were all gone, and she didn't have as much as a comb to do up her hair with, and she wanted to know how she was ever going to dress for breakfast."

"That stumped me, I tell you, when I didn't have the faintest idea how we were going to get any breakfast to dress for."

"When I had succeeded in impressing that fact upon her mind, she seriously proposed that I should shoot something for breakfast, when I had no gun, and couldn't have shot anything if I had been possessed of an armory."

"That was not at all unreasonable," retorted the young lady. "Fathers seem to think that their daughters are born with needles and thread in their fingers, and the ability to use them, and girls have a right to suppose that their fathers came into the world with guns in their hands, and are born marksmen."

"Fishin'-poles, too, perhaps. Then she advised me to let John Randolph catch some fish, though we had no sort of fishing-tackle, and there was not the slightest sign of water except a dry creek."

"She was at least ready and willing to offer suggestions," observed Mr. Wedderburn.

"Yes, such as they were; and she hadn't got to the end of them yet. She finally declared it as her deliberate opinion that we had better go somewhere or do something."

"I would have been heartily glad if she could have told me where to go or what to do, as we had not a crittur left and could not go on, and I had not the faintest idea of how to find our way back, and the darky admitted as usual that he neber had the faintest idea 'bout nuffin'."

"It looked as if we would have to stay right there and die of starvation, though the young woman objected to that right sharply, and it wasn't the kind of death that I fancied, myself."

"What do you suppose caused your guide to treat you so shabbily?" asked Mr. Wedderburn.

"It seems that he saw a good chance to get away with three horses and saddles, and a mule, and a lot of dry goods, and so he slid right out slicker than ile."

"Well, sir, we sat down there and talked the thing over, and looked at it in all sorts of lights, and all we could make out of it was that we were in a very bad fix. There was no breakfast and no sight to find any, and we were getting hungry and the sun was climbing up in the sky."

"So I made up my mind at last that something must be done. There was no use in stopping there, and the only chance was to start out and try to get somewhere, though we should perish in the attempt. I had a sort of a blind notion of the way folks follow trails, and thought that perhaps I could see the tracks of the horses that brought us there, and trace them back to the railroad. It would be a long job at the best, and we would be likely to starve before we could get anywhere; but it was better than doing nothing."

"I picked myself up, and told Celerity to come along; but she didn't start off a bit brisk, and it was then that she brought out something real sensible and practical."

"Don't be in a hurry, pa," said she. "I really believe that I see something moving over yonder, and it may be somebody."

"We looked for all our eyes were worth, and there surely was something over there, and it was alive and was coming toward us."

"After a while we made it out to be five hosses, as they looked to be, and a man mounted on one of them. It couldn't be the guide coming back with our critters, as there was one hoss too many for that, and the man didn't ride a bit like Asa Picknell."

"The hosses turned out to be ours, sure enough, and there was the pack-mule, and the man who brought them was a fine-looking young fellow, who rode straight up to us and asked me if that was our stock and our plunder."

"I should say plunder," says I, "as we have been plundered of it, and then I told him all about the fix we had got into, and asked him how he happened to get hold of the hosses."

"He said that he met Asa Picknell several

miles frpm there. As he knew him to be a complete scalawag he suspected something wrong, and tackled the guide for an explanation. Asa made such a bungling job of the explanation that our friend compelled him to confess the truth. Then he took charge of the stock, and followed the guide's trail back to us, and turned over the property to me."

"You were very lucky to get it back," remarked Mr. Wedderburn.

"As glad as we were lucky, too. And we were right glad to meet that fine young fellow who brought our stock back to us. I took a big liking to him at the start, and he introduced himself as Nat Tyrrell, commonly known as Montana Nat."

"He went back to the station with us, and was real good company. I suppose he must be the man you have engaged for superintendent of the mine."

"I have no doubt of that, Mr. Duncome. As you think so highly of him, I hope you will soon be willing to invest freely in Last Chance."

"I think so. It looks that way now. I do like the man, and I owe him a good turn, and Abijah Duncome ain't likely to forget his debts."

CHAPTER IV.

STRIKING AND GETTING STRUCK.

NEAR the bank of the creek known as the Little Cottonwood a small wagon train had camped, on its way westward.

The leader of the party was Zachary Byrd, an elderly man, who had suffered reverses in Iowa, and was bound for a newly discovered mining-district in the hope of bettering his fortunes.

He was accompanied by his daughter, Alice Byrd, the only remaining member of his immediate family.

Alice, who was just out of her teens, was an unusually sweet girl, with the softest of brown eyes, a wistful and earnest expression of face, a willowy and graceful form, and with a tender and clinging way that made her very attractive.

Not at all the sort of girl that one would suppose ought to be banished to the wilderness to "blush unseen," or to lead a rough life among rough men.

With those two, as a companion for Alice, and as a prospective housekeeper for Zachary Byrd, was Sally Mapes, an unmarried Missouri woman, not at all handsome, but shrewd, active, able and good-natured, who was loved by Alice and respected by Mr. Byrd.

For the rest, the party was composed of three good plainsmen and teamsters, who had thus far proved themselves to be useful and reliable men.

The camping-place had been selected with great care, as hostile Sioux were making trouble in that region just then, and every possible precaution had been taken to guard against a sudden attack.

But, in spite of care and precaution, the attack was made, and it proved to be nearly as successful a surprise as the Indians had doubtless hoped it would be.

A band of hostiles had come across the trail of the wagon train, had found it to be a fresh one, had easily estimated the strength of the party, and had followed it closely, as it promised plunder and scalps.

They had noted the place and manner of camping, and had kept aloof until the time came to strike their blow, of course selecting the hour when the campers were supposed to be sleeping soundly and the guards to be drowsy.

Then they swept down upon the camp like a whirlwind.

The guards proved to be watchful, and at the instant of alarm the sleepers sprung to their posts to meet the attack; but the white men were few in numbers as compared with their foes, and darkness was against them, and the extent of the peril was not at once apprehended.

They did their best and fought bravely and well; but the odds were against them.

Two of the train-men had fallen and Zachary Byrd was wounded and it seemed that nothing short of a miracle could prevent the extermination of the party.

Alice, frightened into a faint, lay in her wagon-bed, protected from flying bullets; but Sally Mapes was made of different material.

As soon as one of the train-men dropped, she picked up his rifle and proved that she had skill and courage to use it.

When the Indians crowded in on the barricades she shot down one of them, and backed up against the wagon that contained Alice, determined to die there in defense of her darling.

It was then that a miracle saved the remainder of the party.

Suddenly, and without the least warning to either side, a tall white man, mounted on a powerful horse, dashed in among the Indians, each hand armed with a revolver, which he discharged so rapidly and with such deadly aim as did terrible execution among them.

The suddenness of this attack, the daring of the new-comer, and the close range at which he sent his unerring bullets into them, produced a panic among the Sioux, who scattered in terror.

At the same time the remaining train-men and Sally Mapes rallied and renewed the fight with greater energy than before.

They were joined by the stranger, who seemed to bear a charmed life, and who directed their operations during the remainder of the engagement.

It was then of short duration. The Sioux made one more charge, to bring away the bodies of their fallen braves.

The stranger was then the object of the praise and gratitude of the rescued party.

"You have saved our lives," said Zachary Byrd. "Please tell me your name, that I may always remember it in my prayers."

"My name is Nat Tyrrell," he briefly replied.

"We know you well, pard," said one of the teamsters. "That is, everybody has heard of Montana Nat."

"I doubt if you have heard much good of me. You don't owe me any thanks, old man. I only did what any decent white man would have done. I heard the scrimmage, and rode up and pitched in."

"But it was a daring deed to tackle that crowd of Sioux," replied Zachary Byrd, "and you did the fighting work of half a dozen men."

"That's just so," remarked Sally Mapes. "The way you peppered 'em was a caution to catfish. You saved the life of my sweet Alice, too, and that's worth a fortun'."

Alice testified her appreciation of the service Tyrrell had rendered to her and her friends.

She fell on her knees at his feet, kissed his hand while her tears fell upon it, and thanked him in broken tones and tender accents.

"This won't do at all," said the young man, as he gently raised her to her feet. "I don't deserve a bit of it, and if you folks don't quit praising me, I will have to go away, though I am sure that you will need help for a while yet."

They did need help, as the train had been greatly weakened, and its dangers were not over. So Tyrrell accompanied the party until they reached a place of safety, and then he was loth to leave them.

When he said farewell and went away, he carried with him the image of sweet Alice Byrd, which was deeply impressed on his heart.

CHAPTER V.

A GIRL WHO WAS NOT GLAD.

IT was a wild and mountainous scene, but beautiful withal.

Westward the mountains rose in broken masses, until the highest and furthest away towered toward the heavens, their tops mingling with the clouds.

Down in the valley yonder wreaths of smoke and puffs of steam spoke of the advance of the arts of civilization and the busy life of men. A stamp-mill was being erected there, and about it were clustered the houses and huts and tents of a small but lively mining-camp.

Up here in the hills the rights of nature had been but slightly encroached upon.

The only sign of human possession was a cabin, larger and better built than the usual run of miners' cabins, perched upon a bit of rising ground and nestling at the foot of a high hill.

Near the door of the cabin was a wash-tub mounted on trestles, and at the wash-tub was working a homely but pleasant-faced woman—no other than honest Sally Mapes, who had played such a plucky part when the Sioux struck Zachary Byrd's train at night on the Little Cottonwood Creek.

The cabin door opened, and forth stepped sweet Alice Byrd, her brown eyes as tender as ever, and her pretty face radiant and her graceful form rounded with health.

"Now, Alice, you oughtn't to do it," said Sally Mapes, a bit reproachfully. "You know your father's orders is that you mustn't stir out of that house."

"Surely I must have a breath of fresh air, Sally dear, if it is only for the sake of my health."

"Your health don't seem to be sufferin', young 'un. But I don't wonder that you want to git out an' look around. It's powerful lonesome up here, at the best. You may stay out a few minutes, but don't stir off the ridge—that's a good child."

"I won't, Sally."

Alice walked to the edge of the rise and gazed down into the valley, and there was a wistful and earnest look in her face that might easily have been taken, if not mistaken, for sadness.

She stood there so long, in one position, and without speaking a word, that Sally at last looked up from her washing and stared at her.

"What are you lookin' at, Alice?" demanded that duenna of the wilderness.

"Just nothing at all," replied the girl. "There is nothing to look at, and I can see nothing worth speaking of."

"Mebbe you're lookin' fur somebody."

"Maybe I am not. If I am, I don't know it. There is nobody about here whom I care to see."

"Now, Alice!" exclaimed Sally, in motherly tones, which she vainly endeavored to make harsh. "How can you say that? There's somebody you ought to care to look for."

"Who is that?"

"Charley Wedderburn, of course. Ain't his uncle the owner of the Last Chance Mine, and a mighty rich man? And won't Charley be rich, too? And ain't you goin' to marry Charley?"

"I suppose so, Sally."

"And ain't you glad of it?"

"I don't know, Sally."

"You suppose so, and you don't know. That's a strange way o' talkin', and I don't like to hear it. Reckon I kin guess what it means, though. Most girls would be glad, but some girls wouldn't. Thar's all sorts of girls, and you are one of the queer ones. A mortal nice young feller is Charley Wedderburn, too."

Alice turned and faced her duenna.

"Don't it sometimes strike you, Sally," she remarked, "that he is just a little bit too nice?"

"Too nice! Well, that's the beatin'est question yet, as if any young man could be too nice! The trouble with most of 'em is that they ain't nice enough. Charley Wedderburn is a real good, soft-hearted young feller."

"Yes, he is soft-hearted enough. Sally, I saw somebody this morning."

"Who was it, dearie?"

"I will tell you, if you will promise to keep it a secret."

"Oh, yes, I can keep a secret."

Alice stepped over to where Sally was standing, and was whispering in her ear, when they were surprised by the sudden appearance of Zachary Byrd, who had come upon them from an unexpected quarter, up the end of the ridge and around the corner of the cabin.

A frown gathered upon his face as he saw Alice standing outside of the cabin, and he spoke to her rather roughly.

"What are you doing out here, Alice?" he demanded.

"No harm, father, I am sure," she replied, with a smile that might have disarmed the anger of her worst enemy. "I was so tired of being cooped up in that cabin. It would be such a blessing to me if I could be free to go out and breathe the fresh air, and feel the fresh earth under my feet, and wander at will in the pleasant mountain paths."

"But you must not do that, my child," replied the old man. "It is dangerous."

"Why is it dangerous?"

"You don't know those miners, Alice. They are wolves. They are wilder than the red Indians. If they knew that there was a woman up here—a young and pretty one—they would tear down the cabin to get a sight of her."

"I've seen some of 'em more'n once, and they didn't try to cut up no rustics," remarked Miss Mapes; but the old man gave no heed to her interruption.

"Perhaps they are afraid of you, Sally dear," replied Alice. "If it is me you mean, father, why should they not have the sight if they want it? I would be glad to see them and be friendly with them, and perhaps I might do them some good."

"Do them good!" scornfully exclaimed her father. "Yes, as the lamb does the wolf good, when the wolf is hungry. Charley Wedderburn says that you must keep out of the sight of these rough men, and he is right."

Alice pouted, and her face flushed as if she was inclined to be angry.

"Charley Wedderburn has no right to say anything of the kind," she replied. "It is not his business to make rules for my behavior."

"You have promised to marry him," observed the old man.

"But I have not married him yet. Oh, father, whom do you think I saw this morning, as I stood in the shadow of the house, and looked down into the valley?"

"Why, Alice, I thought it was a secret?" broke in Sally. "She told it to me jest now, Zach Byrd, as the biggest kind of a secret."

"That was only in fun, Sally dear. Of course I have no secrets from my father. Can you guess who it was, dad?"

"I am not good at guessing. Was it anybody I know?"

"Yes. You ought to know him, anyhow. You surely remember the man who saved our lives when we were attacked by Indians on the Little Cottonwood."

"I surely do remember him."

"Of course you do, father. I could never forget him if I should live a thousand years. Such a handsome man, so noble, so brave, and I am sure so tender and good!"

The old man's face darkened at the girl's enthusiastic words.

"Beware of him Alice!" he sternly replied.

"Beware of him—the man who saved our lives?"

"That was Nat Tyrrell—Montana Nat, as they call him."

"Well?"

"He bears a hard name, my child. He is a fearful and dangerous man."

"I am sure he would never be fearful to me, father."

"Hush, Alice. You ought not to speak in

that way of any man but your husband that is to be. Go into the cabin now—that's a good girl, and stay there until I come back."

Alice went into the house slowly and somewhat pettishly, as she was beginning to nurse a feeling toward her father that was something like a grudge.

Sally Mapes returned to her washing, and the old man descended the ridge.

He took the mountain path, and went down to the camp in the valley, which had been named Last Chance, after the mine.

Last Chance Mine had been given its name by the "grub-stake" prospector who discovered it.

After he had searched the hills in vain for a long time, he declared, when he reached that spot, that it was his last chance, and that if he found nothing there he would give up prospecting. But he found color there, and struck what proved to be a rich vein of gold-bearing quartz.

The capitalist who had "grub-staked" him got hold of his share of the discovery by fair means or foul, and became the principal owner of the mine, having formed a stock company in which he was the largest stockholder.

That capitalist, Mark Wedderburn by name, was seated in the office of the company, near the unfinished stamp-mill, when Zachary Byrd came in.

He was a man who had just passed the meridian of life, tall and well built, who had been very handsome in his day, and had not by any means lost his good looks.

He greeted Mr. Byrd cordially, though somewhat condescendingly, and asked him what was on his mind, as the old man seemed to be worried.

"It is about a person that I am troubled," answered Mr. Byrd. "I have learned that a man has lately been seen about here whom you may have heard of—Nat Tyrrell."

"Oh, yes. I know the man. He was in here this morning. He has been engaged as superintendent of the mine, in place of Wilson."

"The deuce he has!"

"Why, yes. Is there anything wonderful about that? Is he not an honest man?"

"As far as I know he is. He has a hard name, but I have never heard anything against his character for honesty."

"What is the matter, then?"

"The fact is, Mr. Wedderburn, that my daughter Alice has seen him, and she has been going on about him at such a rate that I am afraid she has taken a fancy to him."

"Nonsense, Byrd. You let your imagination work on you. Alice is engaged to my nephew, and I hope she knows which side of her bread has the butter on it. Had she known this Tyrrell elsewhere?"

"Not exactly known him; but he did us a great service at one time—in fact, he saved our lives—and that struck her on the romantic side."

The old man proceeded to tell Mr. Wedderburn the story of the Indian attack on his train at the Little Cottonwood, and the daring exploit of Nat Tyrrell.

"That was well done," said the capitalist. "But it was not such a great affair. It might have happened to any of us. We are all liable in this country to save people's lives at some time or another."

Mark Wedderburn did not give any details of his own life-saving exploits; but it might be supposed from his manner that they had been frequent and important.

"I don't think you need worry about that business, Byrd," he said. "We have decided that we must have Tyrrell. We need a superintendent who can control the men and keep them in order, and that appears to be his style. If you look after your side of the contract, I will look after my side. You know that your interest in the mine is mixed up in this marriage."

"Yes; but I wasn't thinking of that. I am looking only to Alice's good."

"Of course; but it is not likely that a girl of any sense would throw away such a chance as Charley Wedderburn. You know how I feel toward the boy. If he wanted the moon, I would spend my last dollar in trying to get it for him."

"Yes, it is a fine chance for Alice."

"Well, you keep track of the girl, and I will keep track of Nat Tyrrell. His place here will be worth a good bit to him, and if he should interfere with other affairs I can give him a hint that will be apt to tell."

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT.

THERE was trouble at the Last Chance Mine. The miners had made trouble for the managers, and had worried them badly.

After giving due and formal notice of their intention, they had struck in a body, and the operations of the mine had been suspended.

The cause of the strike was their intense dislike of the superintendent, a man named Wilson. He had proved to be an overbearing, petulant and flighty fellow, afflicted with a strong desire to "boss out of their boots" the men in

his charge, but not gifted with any special power of command or administrative ability.

The miners had borne with what they called Wilson's fractious ways, until forbearance had ceased to be a virtue. Finally one of them administered to him a sound thrashing, which was the signal for the general revolt.

When Mark Wedderburn looked into the matter he was duly informed of their action and the reasons for it. He was also informed that they would not accept Wilson as a superintendent again under any circumstances, and they further declared that the new man must be taken from among themselves.

This made the strike an unpleasant affair for the managers, who knew that it would be almost impossible to fill the places of the strikers, but were not at all willing to comply fully with their demands.

In a mountain glen, one morning, while the strike was in progress, were gathered old Bob Bringhurst, the leader of the miners, and a number of his comrades.

Thither came also, Jim Allen, another prominent man among them, and another party of strikers.

"Hello, pard!" was the greeting of Bringhurst. "What brings you here?"

"We came because we heard you were out here," replied Jim Allen, "and we wanted to get hold of the news. What are you caucusing about now?"

"About the news, as far as we've got it, and we don't like the look of it."

"What does it look like, old man?"

"It seems that the company mean to ring in a new superintendent on us, and that they don't mean to take one of us for the job."

"That's bad news, sure enough," said Allen. "How did you git hold of it?"

"I and the rest of the committee went to the office, where we saw Mark Wedderburn and a couple of chaps who called themselves visiting directors. We told them plainly that the men of Last Chance Mine meant to have a say in the choice of another superintendent; that we had settled it that one of ourselves ought to be appointed, and that we wanted to pick the man."

"That's all square enough."

"A durned sight too square for the company," replied Bringhurst. "Mark Wedderburn told us, and the other chaps chimed in, that they meant to manage the mine to suit themselves, and if the men they had been employing didn't like the style, they might leave the work to others."

"That was talk with the bark on, too."

"We then told them that we knew our rights and meant to stick to them, and warned them that if they tried to run over us they would see the liveliest scrimmage ever heard of in these parts."

"That was the solid truth," observed Allen, and the others applauded the sentiment.

"The worst is to come," said Bringhurst. "They wound up the talk by saying that they had sent for another superintendent, that they expected him here shortly, and that we had better settle our differences with him quietly. We demanded our rights, you see, and we got some advice."

"Durn the advice!" exclaimed Jim Allen. "We will settle our differences to suit ourselves, not to please the company."

This declaration met with unanimous approval, and the aspect of the strike was vigorously commented upon by the entire party.

"I don't see what's to hinder us from getting our rights. All we've got to do is to stick together. Are you all solid, boys?"

"Solid as a flint," replied a tall miner named Bill Branch.

"We will make the new superintendent smell sulphur," said a sturdy fellow who was known as Blackjack.

This was plain and decisive talk, and there could be no doubt of the determination of the Last Chance miners to make it hot for the coming man, and to worry the managers to an unlimited extent if their demands were not complied with.

But they were soon to hear some news that might have the effect of shaking that determination.

A miner was seen running down the mountain path that led to the glen.

"There comes Vermont," said Jim Allen. "Wasn't he on the committee?"

"Yes, he went to the office," replied Bringhurst. "Something must be up, sure, as he is on the keen run."

The miner known as Vermont had run so far and so fast that he was quite out of breath when he joined his comrades, and it was not immediately that he could answer the questions with which they pried him.

"What is rushin' you up at this rate, old man?" asked Allen. "You couldn't be more excited if a baby had been born in the camp."

"Worse than that," replied Vermont. "I reckon you will be excited, too, when you hear my news, and will think that I had something to make me run."

"Spout it out, then."

"The news is that Last Chance Mine has got a new superintendent."

"That's no news at all," said Bob Bringhurst.

"The men at the office told us that much."

"But he has come, and you can't guess who he is."

"Like enough we can't, and when it comes to guessing, we don't waste much time at that. Is it anybody we know?"

"Know? I should say so."

"It can't be Mark Wedderburn himself, or Charley, either. Who is it, Vermont?"

"Nat Tyrrell."

"Montana Nat!" exclaimed Bringhurst.

There could be no doubt that the name was well known among the miners, and it produced an evident effect upon them. Some of them whistled, and all stared blankly at each other.

"Montana Nat!" said Bringhurst again. "The man who was put on the pony express route to straighten up the stations."

"Who cleaned out every crooked gang in his division," remarked Jim Allen.

"And left a trail of blood wherever he went," joined in Blackjack.

"He's a keener, and no mistake," said the man who had brought the news. "I reckon he has been the death of more whites than any other man this side of the Missouri."

"That's so," chimed in Bill Branch; "and no man, white or red, has ever been known to git the drop on him."

This recital of the well-known qualities of Nat Tyrrell was not calculated to encourage the miners, and old man Bringhurst doubtless thought that something must be done to restore their confidence in themselves.

"Enough of this, men," he said. "It is nothing but idle talk. We all know what Nat Tyrrell is, and no words of ours can make him any better or worse. He is only a man at the most, and I reckon we are men. When he tackles us, he will find no roughs or rascals, but square men who know their rights and mean to maintain them. We now see what we must meet, and all we have to do is to stand solid."

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Blackjack. "We warn't born in the woods to be skeered by Nat Tyrrell."

"Speak of the devil, and you'll see his shadow," said Vermont. "There comes the new superintendent, and it looks as if he means business."

True enough, Nat Tyrrell could then be seen striding down the mountain path, and all eyes were turned upon him.

He was tall and handsome as ever, and bronzed as usual, but looked thinner and older than when he found his sister Rose on the prairie.

He came among the miners, not smilingly as if anxious to conciliate them, nor sternly as if he proposed to overawe them; but with what may be styled as an everyday business expression on his face.

"Good-morning, my friends," said he. "I was told that I would find some of the hands of the Last Chance Mine up here, and I presume that you are the men."

"We are a part of them," replied Bringhurst, "and we can answer for the rest."

"I am glad to hear that, as I want to have a square talk with you. I am the new superintendent of the mine, and my name is Nat Tyrrell. I am well acquainted with some of you; others know me by sight, and perhaps all of you have heard of me. I have promised the managers of Last Chance Mine to superintend for them, and I always keep my word. I have been told that you drove off the last superintendent, and you may as well understand that I don't mean to leave here alive. If any of you have anything against me, this is the best time to specify it. I give you fair warning that you will never have a better chance to get rid of me than you have right now."

Having delivered himself of his oration, the new superintendent folded his arms, and calmly awaited a reply from the miners.

They seemed to be in no hurry to say anything, and Jim Allen was the first to speak.

"You hain't done us any harm so far," remarked that striker.

"I don't want to do you any harm," said Tyrrell. "If I know myself, I want to help you, and I am sure that I hope to do the fair thing. Above all things I dislike a difficulty, though you know me well enough to believe that I will not avoid a fight if one is forced upon me. I do the work that is cut out for me, and have never yet failed to come to time, whether I had to handle a pick or a rifle, to finger a pen or a pistol."

This sounded like bragging; but the striking miners, who knew the man they had to deal with, clearly did not regard it in that light.

Bob Bringhurst, as the spokesman of his party, put in a quiet word.

"We know enough about Montana Nat, and we ain't hunting a quarrel," he remarked.

This was plain sailing so far; but Tyrrell was not satisfied, and wanted something more definite.

"That is good news for me," he said. "I understand that you have told the managers that you mean to have one of yourselves for superintendent, or nobody. Suppose you strike

a compromise, and adopt me as one of yourselves. Why not satisfy both sides, and avoid a difficulty?"

"There is going to be a meeting," replied Bringhurst, "and we will report to the meeting what you have said to us."

"This is too much like an Indian talk, old man, and we ought to understand each other better. But in any event my course is clear. I will meet you at the mine in the morning."

"We will be there. Come, pard, let's go down to the camp."

Bringhurst took the path that led from the glen, and silently walked away, followed by his comrades.

CHAPTER VII.

TYRELL PLEADS HIS CAUSE.

"THERE they go," muttered Nat Tyrrell, as he watched the striking miners out of sight. "They are silent, if not sullen. But they keep their own counsel, and can be relied on to speak and act like men. They can be moved by other arguments than the pistol and the knife. Unlike the besotted brutes with whom I have had to deal along the lines of the road and in the towns—conscienceless and cowardly scoundrels—rogues, ruffians and outlaws—whose beastly bodies were only fit to feed the wolves and the buzzards. The man who slaughters such cattle does society a service. They are even worse than the red Indians, who have some excuse for their cruelty, yet we are licensed to kill them."

"Was I not praised far and wide for the slaughter I made of the Sioux on the Little Cottonwood, where they had surprised an emigrant train? It was there I saw that fair girl, whose face I shall never forget. It rises before me now, just as I saw it in the gray of that morning, when she knelt before me, and thanked me for saving her life and her father's. The memory of that girl is the only link left that ties me to the stars."

His reverie was rudely interrupted by the crack of a revolver, whose bullet whizzed through his hat.

Tyrrell turned quickly, and saw a man running up the wooded slope on the lower side of the glen.

He drew a pistol, but his secret foe was already out of reach.

"I think I know that man," he said. "He had the hight and gait of Rube Hatcher, whose brother Ben I shot at Cheyenne, and who vowed that he would kill me for that deed."

"I don't a bit like the notion of being shot at from behind my back in such a sneaking style, and I suppose I will have to hunt that man down, or he will hunt me down. Perhaps he hasn't gone far, and I will look about a bit."

The young man easily picked up the trail of the flying assassin, and followed it, pistol in hand, up the slope, and forgetting to keep a watchful eye out for a possible ambush.

But he shortly lost the trail in rocky ground, which he passed over, crossed a ridge, and found himself in a well-worn mountain pass.

Before him, at the top of a rise and near the foot of a hill, was quite a neat and comfortable cabin.

As he gazed at it, wondering what fancy had prompted a man to establish a home in that secluded spot, he saw a man approaching him.

It was not Rube Hatcher, but an elderly man, and Tyrrell had a vague remembrance of his face.

"Good-evening, sir," said the old man, staring at the revolver which Tyrrell held in his hand. "I hope you are not looking for somebody to shoot?"

"Not exactly," replied Nat. "But somebody shot at me a little while ago, and I was looking for the rascal."

"I don't suppose it is the first time you have been shot at, Mr. Tyrrell."

"You know me, then, Mr.—"

"Byrd is my name—Zachary Byrd. Yes, I know you as the man who saved my life and the life of my child, when we were attacked by Indians on the Little Cottonwood."

"Are you that man? I thought I had seen your face before. I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Byrd. And your daughter—that girl with the fair face and the sweet voice—she is alive, I hope."

"She is alive, and she is still grateful to you."

"She remembers me?" eagerly exclaimed Tyrrell. "But that is only one good word you can say for me. No doubt you have heard of me, Mr. Byrd, as a brutal and bloodthirsty man, who has killed his fellow-creatures for the mere love of slaughter, and who has taken advantage of the lack of law in these remote regions to set up the rule of the rifle and the revolver."

"Not so bad as that, Mr. Tyrrell," replied the old man.

"No doubt you have heard me spoken of as a hard and cruel man; but I am sure that you have never heard of me as one who tyrannizes over the weak and cringes to the strong. I have had brutes to deal with, Mr. Byrd, and have learned that there is but one way to tame a wolf. If I have been revengeful and remorseless, I have had plenty of provocation. I

have a sad story to tell you, which I have kept locked in my breast for a long time."

"I don't know why you should say this to me," rejoined the old man. "I have accused you of nothing. Your secrets are your own."

"But I must tell you this, Mr. Byrd, and perhaps you will feel more kindly toward me. I had a sister, Mr. Byrd—a gay, graceful and true-hearted girl, as fair as a lily and as fragile. She was all that was left to me in the world, and we were everything to each other. I was obliged to go westward, leaving her in the care of an old friend of our family, and my duties kept me away a long time. When I returned to the village where I had left her, she was no longer there. They told me that she had gone with a rich man who came to the village and made her acquaintance. That he had not married her was only too probable.

"Weary as I was then, I was too wild to rest. I tracked them eastward and westward, until I lost all trace of them. Afterward I wandered about aimlessly, until one night, as I was crossing a prairie in the rain, I met a madwoman. It was my sister. The scoundrel had deserted her, and she was wildly seeking him. She was nearly dead of starvation and exposure, and the light of reason was quenched."

"That was a terrible blow," said Zachary Byrd, as the image of his own Alice arose in his mind.

"It was worse than death. It left me nothing but a mad craving for revenge. I could not know how her pure nature had been corrupted or captured. I could only see the sad result of man's villainy and woman's weakness. I placed her where she would be safe from harm and kindly treated, and set out to seek the man who had ruined her life."

"Have you found him?"

"Not yet. I have found many who needed killing, but not that man."

"What is his name?"

"That is my secret. I am afraid that if I should even whisper his name to the breeze that blows over me, he would learn that I am looking for his trail."

"Your story is a sad one, Mr. Tyrrell," said the old man; "but I don't know why you have felt yourself called upon to tell it to me. You owe me no explanations or excuses on account of anything you have done in your past life."

"There is a reason, Mr. Byrd. It is true that I am not in the habit of making excuses; but for once I may try to set myself right. I am to be the superintendent of the Last Chance Mine, and expect to remain at this camp for some time. God knows that I have few enough friends, and I would be glad to add one to the little list. I am anxious to stand well with you, sir, and would not wish to be regarded as a monster by so fair and pure a creature as your daughter."

A frown settled on Zachary Byrd's brow, though doubtless against his will.

The cat was out of the bag. It was on Alice's account that Nat Tyrrell had been defending himself so earnestly.

It was a great pity that any person should come between Alice and a good marriage, and more of a pity that the obstacle should be this man, who had rendered her such a signal service. It was an unpleasant task to crush his aspirations, but evidently they must not be encouraged.

"You need not worry about my daughter, Mr. Tyrrell," coldly replied Alice's father, "as you are not likely to see her here."

"But you will see her, and I hope I may rely upon you for justice, if not for a kind word."

"You may expect to have trouble here as well as elsewhere," evasively answered the old man.

"If I do have trouble, it will be forced upon me. I have never yet sought or provoked a quarrel. I never fight except in defense of life or property. Of course I expect trouble."

"It seems to have been already begun," remarked the old man.

"You refer, I suppose, to the bullet that went through my hat awhile ago. That shot was fired, I believe, by the brother of a man whom I killed in self-defense at Cheyenne. He means to kill me if he can, no doubt, and I must find him and settle the matter—peaceably, if possible."

"If you can't settle it peaceably, I suppose you mean to settle it anyhow."

"Of course I can't have a man following me and shooting at me from behind my back. I have no unkind feeling toward that man, but the dispute must be settled. I will leave you now, Mr. Byrd, and I thank you for having listened to me."

"I wish you well, Mr. Tyrrell," replied Zachary Byrd, as he turned away.

As Nat Tyrrell walked down the path, it could plainly be seen that he was grieved at the coolness with which Zachary Byrd had received him.

"When he says that he wishes me well," he muttered, "I suppose he means that he wishes me well away from here. There is something queer about this, and the only plain part of it is that he wasn't a bit glad to see me. He did not even ask me to his house, as common courtesy would have prompted him to do. I

wonder what is back of this. But Alice Byrd is here—I am sure of that now—and it will be strange if I don't get a chance to see her and speak to her."

CHAPTER VIII.

PORK AND BEANS.

As Zachary Byrd slowly walked back to his cabin, there was a sad and perplexed look on his face.

When he reached the top of the ridge he saw Sally Mapes knitting outside, and frowned as he discovered Alice standing in the doorway.

He turned and looked at the receding form of Nat Tyrrell before he spoke to either of them.

"What are you doing in the doorway, Alice?" he demanded.

"I wanted to see what you were looking at," answered the girl.

"I was looking at a man. Go inside, Alice; he may turn and see you."

"He has already gone out of sight. I know who it was, father. It was Mr. Tyrrell, who saved our lives at the Little Cottonwood."

"The less we say about him the better, my child," sternly replied Zachary Byrd.

"Why should we be unkind to a man who has done so much for us? We saw him plainly from the cabin, Sally and I did."

The old man groaned audibly.

"And a mortal fine-lookin' man he is, to be sure," remarked Sally; "though looks don't count for much."

"Please don't be angry, father," said Alice; "but I crept down the hill toward you when you were talking with him, and hid behind a rock there. I heard nearly every word that was said, father, and I believe him and am sorry for him. He surely does not deserve the bad name that has been given him, and you ought not to be so hard on him."

"I am the best judge of that, Alice," replied the old man. "He has a terrible name."

"He has had hard lines, father, and he is terrible only to those who deserve to be frightened. Shall we forget that he saved all our lives when we were attacked by those fearful Indians?"

"I wish he hadn't."

"Wish he hadn't saved our lives, father?"

"I wish we had never got into that trouble, and there had been no occasion for saving our lives. Of course that is what I mean. Don't fret me, Alice."

"He never saved my life thar," broke in Sally Mapes. "It was thar I killed an Injun, and Lord only knows how many more of 'em I'd ha' laid out if I had been let alone."

"We know that you are as brave as any man, Sally," said the girl, "but even you could not have rescued us from that peril without help."

This style of conversation was extremely unpleasing to Zachary Byrd. He had just been surfeited with Tyrrell's talk that was intended to reach the ears of Alice, and he was not at all inclined to listen to her praises of Tyrrell.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, he just then caught sight of two people who were leisurely ascending the mountain-path.

They were evidently strangers to Last Chance Camp, and as evidently unused to the style of dress and the mode of traveling peculiar to that wild country.

The strangers were a man and a woman, and the man was somewhat advanced in years, but still hale and hearty.

He was dressed in a suit of brown broadcloth, including a frock coat, and a silk hat concealed the baldness of his head. He had a lively, businesslike air, and stepped forward briskly as he came in sight of the cabin.

His companion was much younger than he, though not exactly what might be called a spring-chicken, and she was most extravagantly attired, considering the locality, in a silk dress elaborately trimmed and flounced, and a hat with a profusion of feathers, to say nothing of the jewels that sparkled upon her.

Zachary Byrd gladly availed himself of this diversion to distract the attention of his daughter from the subject of Nat Tyrrell.

"What folks are those coming up the path?" he asked. "They must be new arrivals."

"I should say so," replied Alice. "Very new. That girl looks as if she had dressed for a party, and had just stepped out of a bandbox."

"That is a lady, Alice," said the old man, who was struck by the style of the new arrival.

"I won't dispute that, father; but I am quite sure that the Lord made her a girl."

The strangers were by this time climbing the ridge, and Zachary Byrd stepped forward to meet them.

The gentleman in broadcloth greeted him and the others very cordially and briskly.

"How do, friends? How do? We have kinder lost our way in these hills, and have also lost our colored servant, or he has lost us."

"You are new-comers here, I judge," said Mr. Byrd.

"Well, sorter new, and tol'able fresh. My

name is Duncome, Abijah Duncome, from Massachusetts. I made a good sight of money speklatin' in ile, and made it easy and slick, and have come out here to put some of it in a safe and stiddy-goin' mine, if I can find one. P'raps you've heerd of me."

Sally Mapes had smoothed her hair with her hands and put on her sweetest smile, and Alice was looking curiously at the new-comers.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Duncome, at the office of Last Chance Mine," replied Zachary Byrd. "This young lady, I suppose, is your daughter."

"Yes, this is my daughter, Celerity Duncome."

The young lady turned up her nose, which was an easy thing to do, as it had an inclination that way.

"Oh, pa," she said, "how can you keep bringing up that horrid name, when you know how I hate it?"

"Why, it is your name, my child. It was given to you at your christenin', and is down in the Bible, and it's a smooth and easy-goin' name."

"It's a smashin' good name," put in Sally Mapes. "I allus did like those Scriptur names."

Abijah Duncome deliberately donned a pair of spectacles and stared intently at Sally. Miss Duncome put up her eye-glass, and also stared at Sally, who set her arms akimbo and returned the stares.

"Well, folks, I reckon you'll know me when you see me ag'in," she remarked.

"What assurance!" exclaimed the young lady.

"I will know ye, marm," replied Mr. Duncome. "A more sensible remark than that I never heerd from any female woman."

"Pa will persist in dragging up that name," said Miss Duncome, speaking for the benefit of Alice and her father, "though it has been the bane of my life. At school the girls used to call me Celery, and the fights I had over that name kept me bald-headed until I graduated. I have shortened it to Cessie, and the improvement is allowed by all my friends, with the exception of pa."

"I am sure that Cessie is a very nice name," answered Alice, with a smile. "But are you not dressed rather too stylishly, Miss Duncome, for this wild region?"

"Dressed? Why, I have actually nothing on. Would you believe it, pa would allow me to bring only two trunks, and it is impossible to put anything at all in two trunks. But I must do the best I can out here, to sustain the reputation of Boston, and to advance the idea of culture in the art of dressing."

"You say that you are looking for mining investments, Mr. Duncome," said Byrd. "Have you found anything to suit you?"

"It would be a darned sight easier to tell you what I hain't found, and one thing I can't get hold of is pork and beans."

"Beans are plenty in Last Chance Camp, and salt pork is always on hand."

"But how are you goin' to cook 'em?" demanded Mr. Duncome. "In the fust place you must have a bean-pot, and I'll venture to say that there ain't a bean-pot to be found within five hundred miles of here, or mebbe a thousand. It's got to be porous, you see, or it ain't worth a cent. I've been lookin' for a bed of clay, and if I find one mebbe I can get a man to make me a bean-pot. If not, I must try to make it myself, as I'm a sorter jack at all trades."

Sally Mapes, who appeared to be struggling with a weight of thought, opened her mouth to shoot off this stunning query:

"Say, mister, supposin' you do git your bean-pot, whar are you goin' to git your nice brown bread?"

Mr. Duncome adjusted his spectacles and again stared at Sally.

"I never would have thought," said he, "that so much sense could come out of a woman's mouth. As Theodore Parker used to say, there is food for thought in that question. Where am I goin' to get my nice brown bread? That is what you may call a stumper. Now, if my daughter Celerity could cook—"

"Which I can't, pa, and wouldn't if I could," retorted that young lady.

"I know it, my child. Young ladies ain't expected to make themselves useful any more, specially when their fathers have made money out of ile. But somethin' has got to be done. I wouldn't live without my baked beans, not for all the mines in America. That's one of the principles I've allus stuck up to."

"Perhaps it can be managed," suggested Zachary Byrd. "We would hate to lose a capitalist because of the lack of a bean-pot or the scarcity of brown bread."

"Thank you," replied the capitalist. "Well, we will he gettin' on, if you will kindly show us the way to the camp."

Celerity was in no hurry to go. She had become interested in Alice, who was glad enough to find a girl to talk to.

"I am so pleased to have met you," said Miss Duncome, "and I shall want to see you again. If you cannot go down to the shanty they call

a hotel you must let me come up here and visit you."

"I shall always be glad to see you, as I find it terribly lonesome here," replied Alice.

"Come on, Celerity," insisted Mr. Duncome.

"Did you ever hear such a horrid name, Alice? It means swiftness, you know. Don't you think I would have a right to be a little fast, when I must bear such a name?"

"With me everything is so solemnly slow," mournfully answered Alice.

Mr. Duncome again urged his daughter forward, and Zachary Byrd pointed out the way to the camp.

"Good-day to you all," said the capitalist, with a profound bow to Sally. "I am proud to have met you, marm. It's mighty seldom I run across a woman of sense. Come, Celerity. Supposin' I do get my bean-pot, where am I goin' to get my nice brown bread? That was a stumper."

He climbed down the ridge with his daughter clinging to his arm, and Alice and Sally watched them until they were out of sight.

CHAPTER IX.

A PACK OF WOLVES.

It is an old saying that "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do," and the truth of the saying was proved in the case of the striking hands of Lost Chance Mine.

There was a meeting of the miners after the interview with the new superintendent, at which the condition of affairs was fully discussed.

A few of the men showed signs of weakening, being influenced by the firm attitude of the miners and the appointment of Nat Tyrrell; but a large majority were in favor of holding out and insisting upon their demands more strongly than ever.

Nat Tyrrell had a conference at the office with Mark Wedderburn and the two other managers who were present in the camp, at which the position of the miners was considered.

"What shall we do now?" asked Mr. Wedderburn.

"Nothing just yet," replied Tyrrell. "The stamp-mill is not finished, and I suppose the mine can afford to wait a few days."

"I suppose it can. This suspension sends the stock down, of course; but the shareholders are solid, and we are not running this mine for the benefit of the stock market. Still, an Eastern man with money has lately come here, and I want to get him interested in Last Chance. On his account I would like to see things moving along."

"I think you can soon satisfy him, Mr. Wedderburn. Some of the men are inclined to give in, and I mean to go among them and talk with them quietly. They are not likely to hold out much longer, unless they get worried."

"Very well, Tyrrell; but do your best, and get them into the traces as soon as you can."

Charley Wedderburn had something to say.

There was nothing remarkable about Charley, except that he was the nephew of Mark Wedderburn and his prospective heir.

He was a good-looking young fellow, pretty rather than handsome, who always dressed nicely and remembered his position, but with no special force of character that had yet been discovered. He was not a favorite in the camp, though he had done nothing to excite the enmity of the miners.

"It seems to me," he remarked, "that the new superintendent ought to give the men to understand that he is not afraid of them."

Tyrrell stared at the young man with more of amazement than of contempt in his look.

"Does your nephew know what he is talking about, Mr. Wedderburn?" he asked. "Perhaps the men of this camp are better acquainted with me than he is."

"Charley is talking a little out of his line. Never mind him, Mr. Tyrrell, but go on and do the best you can for us."

The strikers in the meanwhile were restless and uneasy. They were not entirely satisfied with the situation or with themselves. The excitements of Last Chance camp had lost their charms. It had suited them well enough at nights and in other intervals of relaxation from labor, to fill their skins with whisky, and give themselves up to gambling or more riotous dissipation; but when amusement became the only business of their lives, they ceased to find pleasure in it, and new excitements were demanded.

At that time some mischievous devil caused Vermont to catch a sight of sweet Alice Byrd as she was standing with Sally Mapes in front of her father's cabin.

He spread the news among his comrades, and they suddenly awakened to a knowledge of the fact that they had been very shabbily treated by old Zach Byrd, in whose cabin the women-folks had probably been for some time, and who had kept them concealed from the camp.

It was decided that a regard for the respect due the camp, as well as their natural curiosity, would compel them to wait on Zachary Byrd at his cabin, and demand a view of his hid treasures.

Accordingly Vermont, Jim Allen, Blackjack, Bill Branch, and half a dozen others, started

into the hills for that purpose, after duly fortifying themselves with rifle whisky.

Old Bob Bringhurst, who had advised against the expedition, accompanied them in the hope of averting evil consequences.

Zachary Byrd was in his cabin at the time, talking with Alice, and the subject of their conversation was Nat Tyrrell.

Sally Mapes had gone out for a pail of water.

Alice had remarked that she had been glad to see the Duncomes, but it would have pleased her better to see Mr. Tyrrell.

"I saw him, Alice, and that is enough," replied her father.

"I wish you could have told him, father, how much I thank him."

"I told him that you remembered him and were grateful to him."

"But that was so cold and practical. It was nothing to what I would have said if I could have got the chance."

"I am glad, then, that you didn't get the chance, and hope you may never get it."

"Am I always to be cooped up and kept from seeing anybody?" demanded the girl.

"You have a lover, and he is to be your husband. What more can a girl want?"

"There are many things that girls want, but I suppose that very few of them ever get what they want."

"I wish, Alice, that Nat Tyrrell had never seen you."

"Then I would not be here to speak of him," retorted Alice.

"I mean to say that I wish he could never see you again. I hope he don't know that you are here; but of course he suspects it."

This worrying conversation was interrupted by the voice of Sally Mapes.

It was raised in a scream outside, and she was highly excited as she dashed into the house with her pail of water.

"Snakes alive!" she exclaimed. "Here's a hull regiment of the roughest men in the mines, comin' up the path."

Zachary Byrd stepped outside, but immediately returned.

"It is true," he said. "There is a crowd of them coming, singing and yelling. This is what I was afraid of."

"The very sight of a man frightens father," remarked Alice.

"It is not one man, Alice, but many, and these men are wolves. Stay in the cabin, both of you, and bar the door."

"Your father is right, dearie," said Miss Mapes. "We must stay inside. They are arter you and me, and I'd ruther hide than kill a white man. Us lambs must keep out of the way of the wolves."

Alice gave it as her opinion that there was no occasion for killing anybody.

"Be sure that you bar the door," said her father, as he took his rifle and went out.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOLF-QUELLER.

ZACHARY BYRD walked to the edge of the slope, and faced the approaching party of miners.

Undaunted by his dark looks and his evident intention of opposing their further progress, they came on rather unsteadily until they reached him.

Vermont, as the discoverer of the "find," and as the one who had the most liquor aboard, took it upon himself to act as the spokesman of the party.

"Hello, Zach Byrd!" he shouted. "How goes it, old man? Off for a hunt?"

"No; I'm only looking out. What brings you all up here?"

"We are on a hunt, and are huntin' somethin' out of the way. The fact is, old man, as you must know, that to some of us the sight of anythin' that wears calico would be the biggest kind of a blessin'. We have heard that you've got some women-folks hid away up here, and have come to ask you to let us take a look at them."

"Don't ask that of me, friends," earnestly answered the old man.

"Why not, Zach Byrd?" demanded Bill Branch. "You needn't be pinch-fingered about it. Jest think what a lonesome set we are, and how powerful pleasin' the sight of a purty face would be, or even one that ain't so amazin' purty, if so be it's a woman's. Be decent about it, and trot out the ducks. We won't eat 'em."

"It can't be done," replied Byrd, in as friendly a tone as was compatible with the sternness the occasion required. "Ask me anything but that."

"You ain't treatin' us right, old man," said Vermont. "It was a mean and sneakin' thing to hide your women-folks away up here, and keep them out of sight of the camp. Now that we've found them out, and come up here straight and square just to beg a squint at them, you ought to haul in your horns."

The situation was becoming serious. Byrd was getting wrathful, and the miners were growing impatient, and Bob Bringhurst attempted to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Shouldn't wonder if you had better try

to accommodate the boys, Zach," he said.

"They have come to you like gentlemen, to ask as a favor what they can take if they want to, and perhaps you might as well be neighborly and obliging."

The old man's face wore a troubled look; but he was none the less firm.

"My friends," he replied, "I want to be neighborly, and I am sure I try to be obliging. I would divide my last dollar with any of you, and none of you ever lack for help when I can give it. But my women-folks are another kind of property. I have always kept them to myself, and I always mean to. Besides, my daughter is engaged to marry Charley Wedderburn, and he says that she must stay close."

Probably Zachary Byrd would not have made the last statement if he had noticed the arrival of Charley Wedderburn, who was then rapidly ascending the slope.

The speech did not have a quieting effect upon the miners, who greeted it with groans and hoots.

"Trot 'em out, old man!" angrily exclaimed Jim Allen. "Charley Wedderburn had better not try to hide his property before he is sure that he owns it."

Mark Wedderburn's nephew stepped before them, his face flushed and his manner excited.

"Who called my name?" he demanded. "What do you want here? This will never do, my men."

"Who are you talking to, young feller?" replied Vermont. "We ain't no men of yours, and this ain't none of your mix. You had better keep out of it, if you don't want to get hurt."

Bob Bringhurst made another effort in the interest of peace.

"You see, Zach Byrd," said he, "that the men have settled their minds on having a sight of these women-folks of yours. Give them a square look, and I will guarantee that they will go off peaceably. If you don't, there may be harm done."

"I am only one old man," replied Byrd; "but I mean to defend my home while life is in me. Whoever enters that door will have to pass over my dead body."

"Come, now, Zach. You know that one man can't fight this crowd."

"I will stand by him, and that makes two," said Charley Wedderburn.

"One and a half, as I count it," remarked Jim Allen. "Trot out your women, old man, and have done with it."

"Somebody is going to get hurt here," said Byrd, as he raised his rifle.

"Then it will be one obstinate old fool," exclaimed Vermont. "Scatter around, boys, and let's close in on him."

The miners approached the house, on each side of the old man, and there was nothing to prevent him from being flanked and overpowered in a few minutes, though his rifle was cocked, and though Charley Wedderburn, pale, but unflinching, stood at his side with a revolver in his hand.

Just then, to the surprise of both parties, Nat Tyrrell appeared on the scene, coming from behind a corner of the house.

"Hold on there!" he ordered, as he stepped in front of Zachary Byrd, his hands behind his back.

They did hold on. His commanding tone not only stopped their advance, but actually made them fall back.

"I thought you were men, and square men at that," said he; "but you seem to be a pack of wolves."

"The boys ain't doing any harm," said Bob Bringhurst. "They came here in a friendly way and the old man ought not to be too hard on them."

"He is only standing to his right. You touch a man in the tenderest place when you meddle with his womenkind. They are his own, and he may hide or show them as it suits him."

"It suits us to get a sight of them," declared Jim Allen. "That is what we came here for, and we mean to have it."

"You have no right to insist upon seeing them against his will," replied Tyrrell. "I wish you would go to work, and keep out of mischief."

"That is our business, Nat Tyrrell, and we can get on without any of your advice," put in Vermont. "Our heads are set on this thing, and it will take more than one man or three to deny us. We must see those women, or down comes the cabin."

"You had better think twice before you make such a move as that."

"Come, boys!" said Vermont. "If we mean business, we must get to work."

It was not certain that all of them meant business. Vermont and a few others, who were ripe for anything in the way of excitement, began to finger their weapons in a threatening manner.

Nat Tyrrell stepped forward, a revolver in each hand, and his dark eyes fairly blazed.

If he was to establish an ascendancy over those men, that was the time to make his mark.

"It is going to be the worst bit of business you ever tried to do, if you begin it," he quietly

said. "The first one of you who raises a pistol may count himself a dead man."

None of them seemed to be anxious to aspire to the honors of eternity, and Bob Bringhurst came forward again with his bit of oil.

"Boys," said he, "I believe you have made a mistake in this matter, and you had better own up and quit."

Jim Allen, who had been one of the first to move against the cabin, was the first to follow Bringhurst's lead.

"It is my notion," said Jim, "that we have been driving a drill into the wrong ledge, and I mean to back out."

Then he slowly followed Bringhurst down the ledge.

Bill Branch also sidled off, remarking that they had meant nothing but a friendly sort of a joke.

"And we don't want to carry it too far," said Blackjack, as he went off with Branch.

"This is about the leakiest crowd I ever got into," observed Vermont; "but I reckon I may as well follow the fashion. Come, boys."

He led the rest of the strikers away, and in a few minutes the ledge was clear of them.

"Thank God that it ended so easily!" exclaimed Tyrrell, as he replaced his revolvers.

"I have to thank you for the peaceable ending of this trouble," said Zachary Byrd. "I found myself in a bad fix before you came."

"You see, Mr. Byrd, that a bad reputation may sometimes serve a good purpose."

The cabin door suddenly opened, and Alice ran out.

She threw herself on her knees at the side of Tyrrell, seized his hand and kissed it.

"Alice, my child!" exclaimed her astonished father.

"Is not this the second time he has saved me?" she replied.

Zachary Byrd was evidently unable to do justice to the subject, and Charley Wedderburn's face wore a look of wonder and disgust.

CHAPTER XI.

AN AMATEUR HIGHWAYMAN.

Celerity Duncome took her father out in the woods for a walk.

She had perceived indications in connection with that capitalist which prompted her to watch him and take him in hand. His thoughts had such a morbid tendency, that the sharp-eyed girl wondered whether he was not contemplating a second marriage.

Therefore she had forced him to take the tramp, for the benefit of his health, as she said, and to get up an appetite.

"My health is all right," he protested. "What do I want with any better appetite than I've got? There ain't nothin' here that's fit to eat, anyhow. I wish, Celerity, my dear, that I could meet that very interesting female who spoke to me about the brown bread."

"Pshaw, pa!" exclaimed Cessie. "What do you want with that ugly old maid?"

"She ain't ugly, and she ain't what I call an old maid, either. She is quite a personable female, and the remark she made about the brown bread showed that she is a remarkably sensible woman."

"Dear me, pa, I do wish that you had a soul that could soar above baked beans."

"Why, my child, I can't soar worth a cent without them. I can't attend to business properly without my natural food that I was raised on, and if I had a soul above my business you mightn't be quite so well off as you are. When I git to dickerin' with Mark Wedderburn about that minin' property, my thoughts are runnin' on baked beans, and I ketch myself speklatin' in hunks of brown bread."

They had reached a hollow in the hills, where the trees were large and close together, and the shade was quite dense.

Suddenly, from behind the trunk of a great oak, a man stepped out into the path before them.

He was somewhat undersized, but thoroughly rough and villainous in his appearance, with his stubby beard, his old slouch hat, his red flannel shirt, and his coarse trowsers tucked into cowhide boots. Yet there was an air of simplicity about him that detracted from his ferocity.

In his right hand he held a revolver, and he spoke in a determined tone:

"Yer money or yer life!"

Cessie uttered a slight cry—a very slight one—but showed no disposition to run away.

Mr. Duncome put on his spectacles, and stared at the highwayman.

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated. "What does this mean? I ain't sure that I am acquainted with you, young man."

"I suppose I ought to scream or to faint," remarked the young lady; "but there is nobody near to hear me or to hold me, and I shall put it off."

"Yer money or yer life!" repeated the rough.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Violet—that is, it ain't none o' yer durned business."

"Violet! Could anything be more unsuitable? Really, pa, this is a queer country."

"You seem to be in the highwayman busi-

ness," said Mr. Duncome, "and that is a poor business, my son. I never carry any money, and I ain't got much life to speak of since I came into this wretched country, where a man can't git a place of baked beans for love or money. I say, young man, as you must have traveled considerable in the highwayman business, mebbe you might tell me where I can git such a thing as a bean-pot."

The man who had given his name as Violet appeared to be puzzled. These people were doubtless something new to him, and he did not know how to deal with them.

"I want you to understand, old chap," said he, "that thar ain't no foolishness about this thing. I'm arter yer money or yer life."

Then it was that Miss Duncome proved herself to be the woman for the occasion, as she stepped before her father, and faced the highwayman.

"You shall have neither my money or my life, you unmitigated, unconscionable assassin!" she exclaimed, shaking her parasol in his face. "Oh, I wish one of the ladies of our lyceum was here, to give you a lecture on moral philosophy. Wouldn't she make your ears tingle!"

"Git out of the way, miss," he replied. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me! You had better not try it. Don't dare to touch me with those dirty hands. If you should spoil this dress, I would have nothing left to wear. Give me that pistol!"

"You had better git out of the way, miss. It mought go off."

"Give me that pistol, I say! Give it to me!"

Miss Duncome was too much occupied and excited to notice a woman who was stealthily but swiftly coming through the forest toward the highwayman, and Violet, as she was behind his back, of course did not see her. But Abijah Duncome saw her, and uttered a low "Bless my soul!" as he adjusted his spectacles for another stare.

The young lady advanced upon Violet, who, as it would clearly never do to shoot her, retreated in good order, but backed directly into the arms of Sally Mapes, who seized him by the shoulders and held him like a vise.

"Let go, thar, or you'll git hurt!" he shouted.

"You can't squirm away from me, you can'tankerous toad," replied Sally. "It is Sally Mapes that has got hold of you. What shall I do with him, miss?"

"Turn him over to the police," suggested Cessie.

"Thar ain't no perlice in these diggin's."

"Let him go," said Mr. Duncome. "I guess he won't do any harm."

"Jest turn me loose," pleaded Violet, "and I won't be ketched in sech a scrape ag'in."

"Hadn't you better take his pistol?" asked Sally.

"Let him go as he is," replied Cessie. "I guess he is only an amateur highwayman."

Sally loosed her hold, and the man returned thanks for the favor, muttering something about being in need.

"If you are hungry, young man," said Abijah Duncome, "I will give you some money."

He confessed that he was not so much hungry as he was thirsty.

"Thirsty! I don't know why any man need be thirsty. We passed a fine spring of water a little way from here."

"Water?" exclaimed Violet in an injured tone.

"Do you take me fur a mule?"

"Dear me! have I insulted you? Here is a dollar, young man. Go down to the camp and pison yourself if you want to."

"Thanky, sir. Seems like I hain't got the hang o' this yere road-agent business."

"It will git the hangin' of you, young man, if you don't quit it," rejoined Sally.

The amateur highwayman sneaked off, and the attention of Mr. Duncome was recalled to Sally Mapes by her last remark.

"That was a very sensible observation, Miss Mapes," he said—"an astonishin' sensible observation. I am glad and proud to meet you again, mum. I wish I could git you to put that powerful mind of yours onto the question of a beanpot and some brown bread."

"Don't be afeard, Mr. Duncome," replied Sally. "You shall have your baked beans, and your brown bread too, afore long, I promise you."

This was clearly a tender and dangerous subject, and Miss Duncome began to grow uneasy. It was necessary to lead her father off from the delicate ground on which he was treading so incautiously.

She took his arm, and he suffered himself to be slowly drawn away.

"That is a very fine woman, Celerity," he insisted. "A remarkably sensible woman."

"Pshaw, pa!" was his daughter's contemptuous reply, as she hurried him on.

Sally Mapes looked after them, and a bright smile lighted up her plain features.

"I do believe," said she, "that the old gentleman is kinder struck on me. I must peartener myself up."

She turned her steps toward Zachary Byrd's cabin, but had not gone far when she saw Nat Tyrrell approaching her.

"Whar the lambs is, thar the wolves will be prowlin' about," she muttered; but she made no attempt to escape from this particular wolf.

"Is not your name Sally Mapes?" he asked, as he greeted her with great politeness.

"I was christened Sarah, but my beaux used to call me Sally," she replied.

"And you had so many beaux that the name soon got to be nothing but Sally."

"That mought have been the way of it," she admitted.

"And you came from Missouri, and there you once lay sick of a fever, and were not expected to live."

"How did you know that?" demanded Sally, who was a little startled.

"You were alone and poor."

"Are you a witch, mister?"

"Having neither friend nor money," continued Tyrrell, "you would have died from lack of attention, if it had not been for a girl who came and nursed you, and who provided everything you needed."

"She saved my life!" exclaimed Sally. "May God Almighty always bless her sweet face and her kind heart!"

"She has not been blessed, but cursed. That was my sister, Rose Tyrrell."

"Rose Tyrrell? I never heard any name but Rose. Your sister? Was that the sister you told Zach Byrd about?"

"The same, God help ber!"

"Poor creature!" said Sally, with a sigh. "I am a rough sort of customer now; but it softens me down to think of that sweet girl, as she used to be."

"Do you and Miss Byrd know the story I told her father?"

"Mighty nigh all of it, I reckon, though we didn't git it from him. Alice crep' down thar, and hid behind a rock, and listened as if she was starved for the word."

Nat Tyrrell's face flushed, and well it might, at the evidence of the interest that sweet girl felt in his life and fortunes.

"She did not believe, then," he said, "that I am such a brute as I have been accused of being?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Do you think I could get a chance to see her?" he ventured to suggest.

"To see Alice?" exclaimed Sally.

"Yes, and to speak to her."

"To speak to Alice? That is a hard question to answer. The old man is mighty sot ag'inst her seein' anybody but Charley Wedderburn."

"If you will get me a chance to see her, Miss Mapes, if only for a few minutes, you will do me as great a kindness as my sister did you when you were suffering from that fever."

Sally pondered this problem.

She looked down at the ground, and up at the sky, and around at the trees, while Tyrrell waited patiently for her decision.

At last her resolution was formed.

"For the sake of that sweet sister of yours," said she, "and because it's a fact that Alice is longin' to have a word with you, I'll try. Do you come back here arter a while, and hang around, and keep your eyes open."

"Thank you," earnestly replied Tyrrell.

"Trot along, then."

They separated, going different ways.

CHAPTER XII.

AN ASSASSIN'S SHOT.

WHEN Sally Mapes reached the cabin, she found Charley Wedderburn there with Alice, and only had a chance to whisper a few words to the girl before she went out.

Charley Wedderburn had come to take her for a walk, as he was privileged to do. In fact, he was the only privileged one in that respect. But even he must have seen that she entered upon the recreation as if it were a task.

As they wandered through the woods Alice was unusually silent and abstracted. The brief communication she received from Sally had set her thoughts to wandering, and her mind was afloat on a sea of speculation.

Charley could not fail to notice her demeanor, and asked her why she was so cold and distant.

"As you say," she answered abstractedly, "it is quite chilly, and we have walked a long distance."

"You don't seem to understand me," said he. "I mean to say that you are not treating me kindly to-day."

"Am I not?"

"You know you are not. What has come over you?"

"I suppose I must be out of sorts. I am tired of being cooped up in that cabin, and never allowed to see anybody."

"You see Sally Mapes, and your father, and me."

"And nobody else," retorted Alice. "That is what I say. I want to be free to walk, to run, to ride, to go where I please, to see whom I choose, and to speak to whom I please."

"Is there any particular person, Alice, to whom you would wish to speak?"

"I would speak to many, I suppose, if I had a chance."

"To *any* man in particular?" he asked, a little spitefully.

"Why do you try to pin me down so close? I don't know why I should be shut up out of sight of all men, as if we were a lot of heathen Turks."

"You saw a man the other day, Tyrrell by name, and you seemed to be very glad to see him."

"So I was, and for that I was frowned upon and scolded, as if I had committed the unpardonable sin."

"You should trust in your father's judgment, Alice. Do you admire that fellow Tyrrell?"

"I admire that *man* Tyrrell. Do not you?"

"He bears a hard name."

"I suppose he does, among such men as those who wanted to storm our house the other day, and he may be proud of it. I am sure that he is as good and noble as he is brave and generous, and I cannot be expected to forget that he saved my life."

This was a sticking point for Charley Wedderburn. He might expect to have Alice throw it up to him that Nat Tyrrell had saved her life; but it was not as pleasant a bit of information for him as it was for her.

"I wish I could save your life, Alice," he said with a sigh.

"There may be a chance for somebody to save it before long, as I am fit to die of disgust."

"What disgusts you, dear?"

He knew of no way to prove his affection just then but by winding his arm around her waist; but she did not take kindly to the proof.

"Oh, things," she replied, fretfully. "Please take away your arm. It is so warm."

"Indeed! A little while ago you were complaining of the cold."

"Was I?"

Clearly there was no getting on with the girl that day, and there was nothing for Charley Wedderburn to do but to come down to hard facts.

"Have you not promised to marry me, Alice?" he asked.

"Ye—es," she answered with a yawn. "You know I have."

"You don't want to break your promise, do you?"

"Why do you ask such tiresome questions, Charley?"

"Because, if your heart is true to me, I ought to be enough for you, and you should not care to see other men."

Alice sighed deeply, but looked him full in the face as she answered:

"If I had a bird," said she, "would I keep it shut up in a cage, to pine and die? No. If I thought it wanted to be free, I would open the door and let it fly away."

This was too much, and Charley was "knocked out." Alice had actually intimated a desire to be free. He could not answer her just then, and must wait for a change in her mood.

"I will take you home now," he said. "You are out of sorts to-day. I hope I shall find you in a better humor to-morrow."

"I hope that I shall have cause to be in a better humor to-morrow," answered Alice.

As they walked back toward Zachary Byrd's cabin, a man came out from behind a tree at a little distance.

It was Nat Tyrrell, who had obeyed, a little prematurely, Sally Mapes's injunction to "hang around and keep his eyes open."

He had not been stationed there as a listener—he was not near enough for that—but his eyes had informed him pretty fully of the nature of the interview between the couple.

"There they go together," he said; "but it is plain that there is no vast amount of love lost on her side, and I may have a chance to see her. I must depend on my friend Sally Mapes, and will follow her directions and wait here a while."

He turned around to select a seat on the turf, and turned just in time to escape a bullet that whizzed by his cheek.

At the very crack of the pistol he dashed off into the forest, without stopping to draw a weapon.

The next moment he confronted Rube Hatcher.

That individual, after firing what seemed to be a safe and sure shot, was completely surprised by the suddenness of the response from his foe.

He pulled trigger again as Tyrrell rushed upon him; but the hammer fell harmlessly on the nipple of the revolver.

Before he could try again, Tyrrell seized him and threw him down, wrenching the weapon from his hand and flinging it away.

Then he let him rise and they faced each other.

"Why did you shoot at me, Rube Hatcher?" demanded Tyrrell.

"You killed my brother at Cheyenne. That is reason enough."

"It would be if I had killed him foully or without cause; but you know that he had fair play, and that I acted in self-defense."

"You attacked him. He hadn't meddled with you."

"How did I attack him? He and a party of roughs had assaulted and ill-treated a frail and defenseless woman. I stepped in among them and put a stop to their sport. Your brother saw fit to face me. He was known as the biggest brute and the most dangerous man in Cheyenne. He drew his pistol and came at me like a wolf. There was no time for a word, nor even a chance to run away. It was his life or mine. I shot quicker than he could, and that shot saved me and settled him."

"That is your side of the story," replied Hatcher. "I heard the other side, and I swore that I would kill you as you killed my brother."

"You have not done it yet."

"I tried; but the devil must have been aginst me, to make me miss such fair chances."

"Yes; you tried, and tried again, and you would keep on trying, no doubt, till there came an end of one or the other of us. Rube Hatcher, this business must be settled. I have not a grain of grudge against you, though you have twice attempted to take my life. But I can't allow a man to go loose who has sworn to kill me and who is sure to go prowling about, looking for a chance to get a shot at me. We are now face to face, and must make an end of this. You can't run off, for you know that I would drop you before you could get ten steps away. So you must come to my terms."

"What are they?" desperately demanded Hatcher.

"Either you must promise to quit hunting me, or you must draw your knife and settle this quarrel by a fair fight right here, hand-to-hand and foot-to-foot."

"I never go back on my word, Nat Tyrrell. I choose the fight."

"Your knife, then!" exclaimed Tyrrell, and each drew a bowie from his belt.

They were apparently well matched as they stood there, both being tall and stalwart men. Tyrrell was somewhat the younger of the two, but the difference in years gave him no advantage.

Though they were well known to each other, each took the other's measure before they began the deadly combat.

"You are better armed than I am," said Hatcher.

"If you mean my pistol, there it is," replied Nat, as he threw away his revolver. "I give you fair warning, Rube Hatcher, that I am going to settle this business in the quickest and surest way, and that I mean to send you to the other world by the fast mail train."

"Keep your brag for boys and women," said Hatcher contemptuously, as he advanced upon his antagonist.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALICE BYRD SAVES A LIFE.

As knife clashed against knife in the fierce con'est that ensued, it would have been evident to an outsider, if one had been there to witness the scene, that Nat Tyrrell had not been indulging in empty brags.

His skill was clearly superior to that of his adversary, and even in that short-armed, hand-to-hand struggle, where it would seem to be almost impossible to strike a blow without inflicting a wound, he parried so skillfully and with such excellent nerve that he did not receive a scratch.

At the same time he did not fight so as to back or mangle his opponent. It is true that in the sharp fencing Rube Hatcher's arms and hands bled freely from several cuts, but that was owing to the fury of his onset, which it was impossible to repel without doing some damage.

Tyrrell appeared to be waiting for a chance to strike such a blow as should at once end the conflict, and soon his chance came.

Rube Hatcher doubtless discovered the fact that he was no match for his antagonist at arm's length, and prepared to make a desperate rush to close in and clinch.

Nat Tyrrell perceived his purpose, and took advantage of the instant when Hatcher was changing his grip on his knife.

Just then he made a quick and powerful upward stroke, and his adversary's weapon flew from his hand and went spinning through the air.

Then they clinched, and after a brief struggle Hatcher fell backward on the ground, with his foe on top of him.

With one knee on his breast, Tyrrell pinned him to the earth, and picked up his knife, which he had dropped at the clinch.

"Now, Rube Hatcher," said he, "your life is honestly mine. I will give it to you if you will promise solemnly to keep the peace toward me."

"I would rather die than be put under bonds," sulkily replied Hatcher, while he glared defiance at his conqueror.

"I swear to you that I will kill you unless you promise."

Nat Tyrrell raised his knife to strike a fatal blow, but before it could fall a woman ran

forth from among the foliage and fell on her knees at his side.

The fierce light faded from his face as he recognized sweet Alice Byrd.

"Spare him!" she pleaded, in tones that could not fail to touch his heart. "Spare him! For God's sake don't kill him!"

"For your sake I will let him live," replied Tyrrell.

He rose from the ground at once, and the prostrate man slowly followed his example.

"That was a close call. Better luck next time," muttered Rube Hatcher, as he sneaked off without stopping to thank the fair girl who had saved his life.

"There he goes," said Nat Tyrrell. "I have given him his life, and in return he will take mine if he ever gets another chance."

"Surely he cannot be so wicked, so mean, so ungrateful!" exclaimed Alice.

Tyrrell turned, as if he had just become aware of her presence.

"I beg your pardon," said he, as he raised his hat and bowed. "This is Alice Byrd, I believe."

"Yes, and I hope that what I have done will not cause you to lose your life."

"Let it pass," answered Tyrrell. "I am not worrying about that fellow, though he shot at me just now from behind a tree. When my time comes I will die, no sooner, and I have safely passed through so many dangers that I sometimes fancy that I have a charmed life."

"I shall pray to God that you may."

"Will you? If any human prayer is heard in Heaven, yours must be. I am so glad that I let that man go. He deserved to die; but I was hot and angry, and would have repented of killing him after I had got cool. How did you happen to come here just at the nick of time?"

Alice blushed, as it was not easy for her to invent a story to suit the occasion.

"I had been walking down the valley, and had gone home," she replied. "Then I started out again, and happened to come this way. I saw you fighting here, and ran up as fast as I could, because I was afraid that you might get killed."

"That I might get killed, or the other fellow, or both of us?" inquired Tyrrell.

"You, of course."

"Did you care for my life, then?"

"Why should I not? Can I forget that you saved mine?"

"I believe I did help some of you out of a scrape once; but that is not worth speaking of. Were you alone when you were walking down the valley?"

"No; it was not as nice a walk as that would have been," answered Alice, as she blushed again. "But I got rid of my company at last, and I saw Sally Mapes—if I must tell the very truth—and she told me that if I should come this way I would be likely to see you."

It was then Tyrrell's turn to blush. At least, a deeper color came into his bronzed cheeks, and his dark eyes shone with a softer light. Had not this fair girl admitted that she came there for the purpose of meeting him?

"Did you really want to see me?" he asked.

"I was very anxious to see you. I wanted to thank you for your bravery in saving us from the Indians, and for your generosity in protecting us against the man who wanted to tear down our house."

"Suppose you put off the thanks to some other time, and that we talk now about something else."

"But I have no time to talk," replied Alice. "Sally told me that I was not to stay here more than five minutes. I haven't any watch, though."

"Nor have I. It seems to me that you have hardly been here two minutes yet. Did you hear what I said to your father when I met him near your house?"

"I must confess that I was a listener then, Mr. Tyrrell. I hardly missed a word."

"Did you believe me?" he earnestly asked.

"As I would believe the Gospel. Who could help it?"

"There are men who could help it, I am afraid. You do not believe, then, that I am the bloodthirsty brute that some people call me?"

A glance at Alice Byrd's face would have shown him a sufficient answer; but she put her thought into words.

"I believe, sir, that you are as good as you are brave, and nothing could make me believe otherwise."

"Such words from you are worth everything to me. They make me feel as if I had awakened out of a long sleep, as if I had just begun to live."

"I hope, then, that you may live long and be happy. Oh, there comes Sally! I am afraid that father has come home and missed me."

It was, indeed, Sally Mapes who was coming toward them from the direction of Zachary Byrd's cabin; but she was not hurrying, and there was nothing in her appearance to give them cause for apprehension.

Yet, when she reached them, she struck an attitude of indignation, and looked frowningly at Alice.

"Why, Alice Byrd!" she exclaimed. "You here yet? Your father would be as mad as a hornet if he knew it."

"Are the five minutes up, Sally?" innocently asked Alice.

"Fifty of 'em, more like. Come right along home, you naughty girl! You'll excuse us, mister."

"I am not so sure of that," answered Tyrrell.

"I go with you, Alice Byrd."

"No you don't, mister," sharply replied Sally. "I'm afraid that's been too much mischief done already, and it's all my fault."

"My heart goes with you, Alice Byrd, to thank you for the more than welcome words you have spoken to me."

Alice turned to go, as Sally Mapes held her arm and was leading her away; but she looked back at Tyrrell as she went, and her lips and eyes alike spoke her farewell.

"What has come over me?" said the young man, as he watched them till they passed out of sight. "Am I Nat Tyrrell, or was I changed in my sleep last night? I am not the same man at all that I was yesterday. I am actually nervous! How some men would open their eyes if they supposed that Nat Tyrrell could be nervous! A boy might knock me down."

He picked up the pistol that he had thrown away, and replaced it in his belt.

"I doubt if I could hit a barn-door at ten steps. Am I going to be ill, or am I bewitched? I must go among men, and see if there is any manhood left in me."

CHAPTER XIV.

RUBE HATCHER'S PLOT.

WHEN Alice Byrd fancied that Rube Hatcher would have enough gratitude, or decency, or manhood to refrain from his sneaking pursuit of Nat Tyrrell after Tyrrell had spared his life, her feelings had run away with her judgment.

If she had known the man, such an idea would never have entered her head.

Nat Tyrrell knew him, and he had not an atom of her confidence.

But even Nat Tyrrell would not have thought that he would be guilty of such detestable meanness as he was shortly to plan.

Rube Hatcher did not leave the neighborhood of Last Chance Mine and camp, though he was careful to keep out of the way of Nat Tyrrell. Not because he was afraid that Tyrrell would punish or expose him, but because he did not wish to look upon the face of the man he hated until he could make a sure thing of "settling" him.

He mixed in, however, with the men of Last Chance Mine, and left no effort untried to prejudice them against the new superintendent.

In this his success was not at all encouraging. The men had been prejudiced against Tyrrell at the start as much as they could be, and their prejudice had been gradually, but pretty rapidly wearing away.

He had a quiet and unassuming way, and at the same time a forcible and commanding way, such as suited the sort of men he had been selected to control. He had suffered matters to drift along, making himself at home among the men, and merely dropping now and then the right word at the right time, until they had grown to like him and to look up to him.

Old Bob Bringhurst had been favorable to him from the start, and so had a few others. Vermont and Bill Branch soon came over to that side, and their influence, added to the quiet persuasion of Tyrrell himself, finally induced the strikers to abandon the contest and consent to go to work under the new superintendent.

So it was settled that mining operations should begin again, and the day and hour of starting were fixed.

Though this looked like failure for Rube Hatcher, closer consideration of the subject caused him to regard Tyrrell's triumph as his own opportunity.

He formed a plan which seemed to be sure to succeed, and he only needed an obedient assistant to help him carry it into effect.

Looking about for a man to suit his purpose, he ran across the amateur highwayman who had failed to frighten Abijah Duncome and his daughter, and who had since that attempt been loafing about the camp without any visible means of support, subsisting upon the charity of the miners. Hatcher had had occasion to use that man elsewhere, and had found means of making him submit to his will.

"Hello, Violet, you cussed scalawag!" was Rube's friendly greeting, "what are you doing in these diggin's?"

"Jest nuthin' at all," was the sullen reply.

"And starving to death at it, to judge by your looks. What brought you out here, anyhow?"

"Why, Rube, I don't see why I ortn't to make a strike like other fellers; but I can't do it. I started in at the road-agent business a bit ago, but made a dead failure at the first jump, and backed clean out."

Hatcher laughed scornfully.

"What a fool you are!" he exclaimed. "It takes sense and nerve to carry on that business, and you hain't got either. You are never worth

a cent unless you have some such man as me to show you the way and push you on."

"That's so, Rube. Thar's lots of push about you, and lots of holes fur you to push a feller into, too."

"Now, Violet, I am sorry for you, and am going to do you a favor. I've got a jolly good scheme on hand, and will let you help me with it and pay you for your trouble."

"Wot sort'r a scheme, Rube?"

Rube Hatcher proceeded to unfold his plan, or as much of it as he saw fit to disclose to his confederate.

"The point of it is," said he, "that I want to git even with Nat Tyrrell for killing my brother, and this is the surest and easiest way I know of to settle that business. They are to start the work at the mine to-morrer, and he is safe to be the first to go in, and he will go in alone to see that things are all right. Then I will have a little trick ready for him, so that he will git hurt before he comes out of there."

Violet hesitated.

"I hain't got no grudge ag'in Nat Tyrell," said he, "and I don't like the notion of foolin' with him. Mought as well play at ticklin' the toes of a grizzly."

"What a baby you are!" replied Hatcher. "Don't you see, Violet, that I am to take all the risks, and that you won't have anything to do but stand outside and give me notice if anybody should come in sight?"

"Whar's the pay to come in?"

"I am to be the paymaster, and I will pay you well, too. It will be a powerful sight better than starving in Last Chance camp. And look here, Violet—if you don't go in with me I will give you the worst thrashing you ever dreamed of, and will drive you out into the woods. If you play me false, or blow on me, I will kill you, as sure as my name is Rube Hatcher, and you know that I always keep my word."

These were strong arguments, and Violet consented to "go in," moved by the fear of Rube's threats far more than by his promise of pay.

Hatcher proceeded to make his preparations, which included a package of blasting powder, a can of coal-oil and a coil of fuse, and the next day he went to the mine, accompanied by Violet, whom he compelled to carry a portion of the "outfit."

He had previously formed the acquaintance of Patsey McQuaig, the watchman at the mouth of the mine, and had gained his friendship and learned his weak points.

The result of this acquaintance was that when the two conspirators reached the mine, Patsey was lying dead drunk in a hollow about a quarter of a mile away, and Rube Hatcher had a clear field for his operations.

He went into the mine, carrying a lantern and the powder and forcing his assistant to bring the other articles, though Violet protested against a service that was not down in the programme.

Having gained the point that he desired to reach, he sent Violet back to the entrance to stand guard.

"Keep your eyes skinned, you ornary scalawag!" he ordered. "Look out sharp all around, and if anybody comes within sight, let me know at once. If you don't mind every word I tell you I will make you wish that you had never been born into this world."

Poor Violet was enjoying no enviable state of feeling when he reached the mouth of the mine and looked around.

He was sorry that he had consented to take part in the scheme, but was afraid to back out.

He would gladly have run away, but sad experience had taught him that Rube Hatcher was a man of his word, particularly when keeping his word involved personal injury to a young man who was known as Violet.

He waited and watched, trembling lest something should happen to cause the scheme to fail and bring down upon him the wrath of his confederate, and the time seemed to him insufferably long, though it was in reality very short.

"Ef I wasn't born to be hung," he said, "thar ain't no use talkin' about signs. I went inter the road-agent business and got bu'sted up in the shortest kind of order, like a durned fool. Now I am here, and in the cussedest sort of a scrape, all along o' Rube Hatcher. Ef I don't git hung fur this, 'tain't wuth while to grow hemp. It's a mighty skeery thing to wait out hyar all alone while that cussed work is goin' on in thar. I would run away if I darst, but Rube Hatcher would hunt me down, sure as shootin', and give the coroner a job o' settin' on my corpus."

"Ugh! Thort I heerd somebody comin', and it sent the cold chills scootin' all through me. Seems like I can't keep out o' devilment nohow I kin fix it. Wish I was home in Injinnany. Wish I'd never met up with Rube Hatcher. Wish he'd hurry and come out o' thar. I'm gittin' powerful shaky. It 'u'd bu'st me wide open to git caught in such a scrape as this."

"Now I hear him. Thank goodness, he's comin' out at last."

Afraid as Violet was of Rube Hatcher, he was delighted when he saw that conspirator emerge from the mine with his lantern and the remainder of the fuse.

Rube extinguished the light and looked about sharply and suspiciously.

"It's all right, Violet," said he. "The fuse is laid and lighted, and is attending to its business in a steady and reliable way. I built up a sort of a fence in there that will be sure to make Nat Tyrrell stop when he comes to the right place. Unless the devil watches over him and saves him, I will get even with him at last."

"I don't want to git even with nobody," muttered Violet.

"But I do; and you want what I want, if you know what is good for you."

"Ef it's all right, Rube, let's git away from hyar. Somebody mought come."

"I never thought you were quite so much of a coward, Violet."

"I don't see no fun in foolin' with Nat Tyrrell, and that's a fact."

"Come on, then."

Violet started to run off into the woods, but Rube Hatcher jerked him back savagely.

"You needn't run as if the devil kicked you. I didn't tell you to go, but to come. Follow me now, and walk on like a white man, or I'll break your legs!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE DISASTER AT THE MINE.

ABIJAH DUNCOME had not yet concluded his "dicker" with Mark Wedderburn for a share in Last Chance Mine.

The capitalist from Massachusetts did not find it so easy to strike a bargain with Wedderburn since Nat Tyrrell had been secured as superintendent, and since he seemed likely to come to an amicable understanding with the miners.

They were conversing on this subject in the office of the company on the day set for the renewal of mining operations.

"As you say, Mr. Wedderburn," remarked Duncome, "the Last Chance Mine seems to be a vallyble property; but it's my notion that you've set your figgers e'na'most too high."

"There is plenty of money to be made out of that mine, Mr. Duncome, if it is carefully managed and well worked."

"But I'm afraid that your miners are a scaly and unsartin lot, more likely to do harm than good."

"All we need is a good superintendent, and I think we have that sort of a man now."

"Yes, Tyrrell seems to be a fine young feller, with plenty of sense and grit."

Mr. Duncome, looking out of the window, saw John Randolph approaching the building at an unusually rapid rate.

"Gracious sakes!" he exclaimed, "here comes that colored servant of mine as he calls himself, though it is precious little service he does. I never knew him to be in a hurry before. Here, John Randolph! Come in here!"

As the darky entered, it could be seen that his face was almost blue with fear.

"Where have you been all this while, John Randolph?" demanded his master. "What is the matter with you?"

"Please, Mistah Duncome, I'se been skeered most to deff."

"Skeered? That ain't anythin' new. You'd git skeered at a skunk, or a turkey buzzard, or your own shadder. What's skeered you this time?"

"A ghost," answered John, his voice sinking to a whisper.

"A ghost, and in the daytime? That's a leetle too much. Why, John, this country is too new for ghosts, and the people don't have time to fool with 'em."

"But I see'd a ghost, shuah."

"What kind of a ghost, John?"

"A woman ghost, sah. I was walkin' up de walley, and a stun came rattlin' down at my feet. I knowed dat somefin' made de stun rattle down, and I looked up and dar I see'd a woman standin' on a rock. Her clo'es was tored, and her ha'r was hangin' down, and her face was as white as deff, and her eyes was as big as sassers and blazin' like fiab. Quick as I looked at her she wanished into de a'r, and I run like a scart wolf."

"What do you think of that, Wedderburn?" asked Abijah Duncome.

"It won't do, Duncome. It won't do at all!"

"Too thin, ain't it? When you look at that darky, sir, you see the biggest liar that walks on two legs. He'd rather tell a lie for nothing than get big pay for speaking the truth. Tell this gentleman, John, who was your master before the war."

The darky grinned, but answered solemnly.

"Ole John Randolph, ob Roarin' Oak, who was President arter General Washington."

"Did you know General Washington, John?"

"No, sah, but my mudder knowed him well. She used to wash his clo'es and shine up his buttons. He lived down on Jeems river, and he leff two darters, Mary Jane and 'Lizabeth. Mary Jane married—"

"That will do, John. He has told that string of lies, Wedderburn, until I guess he believes 'em. He jest delights in lyin'. I don't know what I shall ever do with him, unless I can git him into politics."

"Suppose we walk over to the mine, and see what is going on there," suggested Wedderburn.

"Very well, I hope for your sake that things will work smooth. Foller us close, John Randolph, and you won't be bothered with ghosts."

Before the two men of money reached the mine, and shortly after Rube Hatcher and Violet had got out of the way, Charley Wedderburn arrived there, accompanied by Bill Branch and another miner.

Branch carried a lantern, and Charley wore an air of authority and importance that was new to him.

While the lantern was being lighted he looked about, and appeared to be disappointed at not finding some person whom he expected to see there.

"I wonder what has become of the watchman," he said. "I was here an hour or so ago, and he was out of the way then, and he is not in sight now."

"I saw him drinking with a stranger yesterday," replied Branch, "and p'raps he has gone on a spree."

"He won't get a chance to spree any more about this mine. I wish you had reported to me what you saw yesterday. We don't pay men to go on sprees."

"The strike has mixed things up powerful bad," suggested Branch.

"Yes, and I believe my uncle would have done better if he had given the men their way. I am afraid that he has only jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire by taking up with that fellow Tyrrell."

"Do you really think so, sir? The men seem to have got it settled among them that he is the sort of man that will do to tie to."

"They are mistaken. Depend upon it, he is sure to show up in a bad light before long. Come, Branch, let us go in and see if the mine is all right."

Charley Wedderburn took the lantern and went into the mine, followed by Branch and the other miner.

Soon another party arrived on the scene.

Nat Tyrrell came to the mouth of the mine, accompanied by Bob Bringhurst, Jim Allen, Vermont, Blackjack, and several other miners, who carried mining-tools, lanterns, and a bucket of water.

"There ought to be a watchman here," said Tyrrell, as he looked about.

"There was one," replied Bringhurst, "but he is a scaly lot, I am afraid. I saw him floating around yesterday with Rube Hatcher."

"With Rube Hatcher! I don't like the look of that. I must find a man for the place who won't be so scaly. Well, my friends, all we can do to-day is to see that everything is ready for beginning work in the morning. I understand that a few of the men are still inclined to hold out, and I would like to make a clean sweep of them. When we get fairly at work I don't think we will be likely to quarrel unless we have something to quarrel about. Of course none of you want the mine to come to any harm, and we can agree together to keep it in good order."

"That is fair and right enough, I am sure," remarked Bob Bringhurst. "For my part, I don't see why all shouldn't come right in and go to work."

"Don't bother your head about that, old man," replied Vermont. "It is best to let things settle themselves quietly, without shootin' off our jaws too much."

"Just now," said Nat Tyrrell, "we will take a look at this hole in the ground. Who will go in with me to show me the way?"

"I will," replied Bringhurst.

"No; you are too old and stiff," said Jim Allen. "I will go. But what a smell of smoke there is in the air."

All the others sniffed, and smelt the smoke plainly enough, though it had just begun to be discernible.

"I don't know of anything burning about these hills anywhere," observed Vermont.

Bob Bringhurst stepped inside of the mine entrance, and at once perceived that the smoke was coming up the incline.

"The smoke is in the mine," said he. "Something is the matter there, sure."

"Smoke in the mine?" exclaimed Tyrrell. "That looks like foul play."

Jim Allen dashed in at the entrance, but soon came out, looking as if he had seen a ghost.

"The mine is afire!" he exclaimed. "The timbers are burning!"

"If the mine is afire," said Tyrrell, "some scoundrel has set it afire. Give me that bucket of water. I will go in and see what this means."

"Hold on!" shouted Bob Bringhurst. "Here is somebody coming out."

All crowded around the entrance, and saw Bill Branch come staggering up the incline, supporting one of the miners who was at once recognized by his friends.

Willing hands were there to help him; but the man whom Branch was helping was already insensible, and Branch, as he emerged from the mine, fell on the ground, gasping for breath.

Tyrrell knelt at his side, and raised his head.

"What's the matter, man?" demanded Nat.

"Can't you speak?"

"I am smothered," faintly answered Branch.

The miners hastened to relieve their insensible

comrade, and Tyrrell pulled out a pocket-flask, which he tendered to Bill Branch, who was not too far gone to take a hearty swig of the liquor it contained.

"Take a good pull at it," said Nat. "Now tell me what is the matter in the mine?"

"The timbers are burning, and the mine is full of smoke," replied Branch.

"Is anybody in there?"

"Young Mr. Wedderburn."

Tyrrell sprung to his feet at once.

"There is a man in the burning mine!" he exclaimed. "Who volunteers to go in and bring him out?"

There was no reply. The men were clustered about Branch and the other man who had come out of the mine, and none of them spoke.

"Does nobody answer? What are you made of, men?"

Zachary Byrd, who came running up just then, anxiously inquired what was the matter.

"The mine's afire, and Charley Wedderburn is in there," answered Vermont.

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed the old man.

"Won't you save him, some of you?"

"I have just called for volunteers, but got no response," replied Nat Tyrrell.

"There is powder in the mine," suggested Branch.

"I doubt if powder can kill me," said Tyrrell, "and I believe I am volunteer enough for this work. Give me a lantern!"

He dipped his handkerchief in the bucket of water, and tied it over the lower part of his face. Then he took the lantern that was handed him, and dashed into the mine.

Zachary Byrd started to follow him, but was pulled back by the others.

"Don't try that, my friend," said Bob Bringhurst. "It is too dangerous. Last Chance Mine has gone up for ninety days."

"And the new superintendent has gone up for good," rejoined Vermont.

"You may say that," chimed in Bill Branch. "No man could live in there, and I am sure that we left a lot of blasting powder in the mine."

"How did the fire come there, Bill?" asked Jim Allen.

"That is more than I can tell. I went in with Charley Wedderburn and Hank Webb, and we found a lot of stuff piled up in the lower level. As we were moving it out of the way we heard something like a fuse fizzing. Then a pile of pine burst into a blaze, with a strong smell of coal oil, and the timbers caught quicker than you could wink. Charley Wedderburn wanted to stay and try to put it out; but we had too much sense for that, and knew there wasn't any chance. We ran to save ourselves, and thought that he was coming after us; but I'm afraid he didn't get far."

"Tyrrell will find his grave in there sure," said Jim Allen. "It is a pity he should die for Charley Wedderburn. I heard that chap say that he wished Nat Tyrrell was in a place where they don't need overcoats the year round."

"I reckon he is in a hot enough place now," remarked Vermont. "Hello! here comes old Wedderburn."

Mark Wedderburn and Abijah Duncome reached the mine just then, having loitered on the way to "dicker," and the countenances of the men who were standing around told them that something serious was the matter.

"Is there any trouble here?" asked Mr. Wedderburn.

"Trouble enough," answered Vermont, blurting out the hard facts at once. "The mine is afire, and your nephew is in there."

"Merciful Heaven!" exclaimed Charley's uncle, staggering back as if he had been shot.

"Mr. Tyrrell has gone in there alone to bring him out," said Zachary Byrd.

"I knew that man Tyrrell was good stuff," remarked Abijah Duncome.

"You are right about that, stranger," rejoined Bob Bringhurst. "Nat Tyrrell is a man who will do to tie to."

"There won't be much of him left to tie to, after this," muttered Vermont.

Mark Wedderburn anxiously inquired if nothing more could be done; but the men shook their heads ominously.

"There is powder in the mine," said Branch. "It is strange that we don't hear from it. Better stand back, mates. There's no telling what may happen."

"We will never see Nat Tyrrell again—nor Charley Wedderburn, either," was the prediction Vermont uttered.

A joyful cry burst from the lips of Zachary Byrd, who was standing inside of the mine, in spite of the smoke.

"He is safe!" shouted the old man. "Here he comes! God bless the bravest heart that ever beat!"

The next moment Nat Tyrrell staggered forth, bearing the insensible form of Charley Wedderburn, which he laid at the feet of the young man's uncle.

Bob Bringhurst and Zachary Byrd seized him as he was about to fall, and the cheer that the excited miners raised made the forest fairly ring.

Then two dull, heavy explosions were heard, one quickly following the other, and a great cloud of smoke and dust rushed out at the mouth of the mine.

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVE AND DANGER.

CHARLEY WEDDERBURN did not die from the effects of his exposure to the fire and smoke of the burning mine.

He owed his life mainly to the generous bravery of Nat Tyrrell, who had brought him forth at great peril to himself; but there was another person to whom much credit was due.

That person was Miss Duncome, who had gone to the office of the company to look for her father, and had followed him to the mine, where she arrived just in time to render efficient service to Charley Wedderburn.

She had not neglected her opportunities at her schools, and lyceums, and lectures in Boston, and possessing a keen intelligence and a natural inclination toward scientific studies, she had fairly made herself mistress of several subjects with which it is worth while to be acquainted.

She at once perceived that the young man had been asphyxiated, and proceeded to do what the case required, as far as it could be done at the moment and on the ground.

Then she caused him to be removed as speedily as possible to the camp, where she acted as his physician and nurse so carefully and affectionately that within two days he was able to be about.

Charley appreciated her efforts and attentions highly, and felt himself under great obligations to her for her skill and care.

He told his uncle that he had never met such a girl as Celerity Duncome.

"Of course she is not as pretty as Alice," said he, "and I am not the least bit in love with her; but she is wonderfully smart, and has a firm but tender way of taking care of a fellow that fetches him right along."

"I consider her a very fine young lady, and not near as flighty as she sometimes appears to be," replied Mark Wedderburn. "It would have been a good thing if you had taken a notion to marry Miss Duncome, as she will have plenty of money, though you will be well enough fixed that way, I hope. She is a little older than you, I suppose; but I sometimes think, Charley, that it would be well for you to have a wife who is something more than a pretty girl—a woman who has brains and a will of her own. But you have set your heart on marrying Alice Byrd, and the sooner you go along and marry her, the better."

"Yes, sir," answered Charley; "I could not live without Alice. If anybody should try to take her away from me, I am sure that I would do something desperate."

"Nonsense, my boy. If you should lose Alice, you would live as other folks do, and would soon get over it. That business of heart-breaking is a good thing to put in a story; but it don't exist in real life. But you had better bring the matter to a settlement pretty soon, if you want to make sure of her."

As for Nat Tyrrell, he came out of the mine with only a few burns, which quickly healed, and did not prevent him from going about and attending to affairs of business and other affairs.

There could be no doubt that the timbers of the mine had been purposely set afire, and that the explosions had been intended to do damage.

The miners could account for one of the explosions, but not for two, as the powder they had left inside would not have been sufficient to produce both.

But Tyrrell, connecting the evident feloniousness of the affair with Rube Hatcher's seduction of the watchman, was decidedly of the opinion that his enemy was at the bottom of the mine disaster.

He kept this suspicion to himself, however, as it was not his way to air his private grievances in public, and as he had not sufficient evidence to fix the blame on Hatcher, who prudently kept himself out of the way.

Although the reopening of the mine kept him constantly employed, the new superintendent did not fail to attend to two other points of business.

He took a lively interest in Alice Byrd, and he watched for Rube Hatcher.

Hearing that his enemy had been seen prowling about in the forest, he sallied forth to search for him, hoping to find him and call him to account.

He saw nothing of Rube Hatcher, and was about to return to the camp, as the day was nearing its close, when he was surprised and delighted by an accidental meeting with sweet Alice Byrd.

Perhaps the meeting was not entirely an accidental one on either side.

Tyrrell had honestly looked for Rube Hatcher and considerations of safety required him to watch carefully for his foe as he walked through the woods; but his footsteps had none the less been turned in the direction of Zachary Byrd's cabin, and he had finally come almost within sight of it.

It is reasonable to suppose that this was not

entirely accidental, but that he had hoped to get a glimpse of one of the occupants of the cabin.

As for Alice, there was no doubt in the world about her intentions.

When her father came home after the mine disaster, he gave her and Sally Mapes a full account of that episode and was loud in his praises of Nat Tyrrell's daring and generosity, enlarging upon the service he had rendered Alice in saving the life of her lover.

She was not enthusiastic on that point, but assented warmly to his commendations of Tyrrell, who had become to her a thoroughly ideal hero.

"You might go down to the camp and help take care of poor Charley, and not leave it all to Miss Duncome," said her father.

"I am sure that she can do it much better than I can," answered Alice. "But I would be glad to go, and perhaps I might see Mr. Tyrrell there and thank him for what he has done."

That was quite another matter, and Zachary Byrd concluded that she might as well not go down to the camp.

But he relaxed the strictness of his regulations somewhat and permitted her to walk about near the cabin when Sally Mapes could spare the time to accompany her.

The same afternoon that witnessed Tyrrell's search in the woods for Rube Hatcher, also saw Miss Duncome tripping lightly up the mountain path toward the habitation of the Byrds, to report the convalescence of her interesting patient.

Being there, she was of course in no hurry to go away, and, as the two girls had much to say to each other, they went out of doors, leaving Sally attending to her duties in the house.

While they were conversing out there, sitting near the edge of the slope that led to the house, they both at the same time caught sight of Nat Tyrrell, as he was walking in the woods below, and both recognized him.

Alice's sudden start and the vivid flush that came into her face told the quick-sighted Cessie enough. She saw what her friend wanted and hastened to put her at ease.

"Run down and speak to him, dear, if you want to," said she. "I will keep watch here and will signal you if you are needed."

Alice acted on this hint at once; but there was a little art in her movements.

She went to the end of the ridge, and made a little detour as she descended, so that she might seem to come upon Tyrrell casually.

His greeting was very polite, and hers was tinged with a friendly warmth.

"I am so glad to meet you, Mr. Tyrrell," she said. "My father has told me all about that dreadful affair at the mine, and how bravely you acted in the rescue of poor Charley Wedderburn, and I am very glad of the chance to tell you how greatly we all admire that exploit."

"It was only a part of my duty, Miss Byrd. But I am glad for your sake, though I am afraid that he is no friend of mine, that I was able to do Mr. Wedderburn a service."

"He surely ought to be your friend, and it is a great thing to save the life of a fellow-creature. But you seem to run so many risks, and to be so continually in danger. For all I know, you may be in danger at this moment."

A pistol-shot emphasized her words, and a bullet passed through Tyrrell's coat, making him jump back.

He hastily drew his revolver to fire at a man whose retreating footsteps could be plainly heard, but refrained.

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Alice. "That man shot at you. Could it have been the same man whose life you spared for my sake?"

"I am afraid it was," he replied.

"He will seek your life again, and he may yet succeed in killing you."

"No, there is no danger of that now. The third time is the charm. He has missed me the third time, and I consider myself safe."

"I will pray God that you may be."

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Is this another of them?"

No. It was Charley Wedderburn, who had heard the shot, and came running toward them, his face pale and his limbs trembling.

"What did that shot mean?" he demanded.

"Did you fire it, sir?"

"No; but I believe it was fired at me," answered Tyrrell.

"I must say, Mr. Tyrrell, that when you know that you are in the way of getting shot at by men who have grudges against you, you have no business to expose a lady to danger in your company."

Alice's face reddened as she listened to this foolish and unjust accusation.

"You are quite right, Mr. Wedderburn," replied Nat. "I ought to keep myself out of dangers, also. But I hope you will believe me when I say that I had no intention of exposing this young lady to any sort of peril. I wish you good-evening, Miss Byrd, and safer company."

He bowed and walked away, and Alice looked after him as he went.

"I am astonished at you, Alice," said Charley Wedderburn. "You know that your father would object to your being out here and talking to that man."

"I was thanking that man for having saved your life," she answered, with a smile in which there was a dash of scorn.

"I am able to attend to that business myself, and I will see to it that he don't lose anything by what he did for me."

"Why, Charley, you speak as if you thought he would consent to be paid for that service. I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself for the insulting manner in which you addressed him here."

"I think he had no business to be here. Come, Alice; I must take you home."

This proposition was answered by Miss Duncome.

She had heard the shot, but had perceived that no harm was done, and was not excited about it.

When Charley Wedderburn approached, however, she descended the slope swiftly but gracefully. She heard and saw enough to tell her that Alice was in for a scolding, and was ready to quarrel with her lover—an unpleasantness that had better be avoided than allowed.

She proceeded to avoid it.

"No, Mr. Wedderburn," said she, "you must take me home. Here I am, and night is coming on, and there is nobody but you to escort me back to the camp. Besides, sir, you are not well enough to be tramping about here in the woods. It is against my strict orders. I am your physician and nurse, remember, and I order you to return at once to the camp."

There was no getting out of this, and Charley submitted gracefully.

He offered Miss Duncome his arm, and walked away with her, while Alice returned to the cabin.

CHAPTER XVII.

MARK WEDDERBURN'S CARES.

ABOUT those days Mark Wedderburn had various troubles and perplexities.

In the first place, the mine was in a bad way.

The burning of the timbers had caused the roof to fall in at the earthy portions, and the explosions had filled other parts with shattered rock and debris.

All that stuff had to be cleared away, and shoring up and timbering had to be gone through with again, before the real work of mining could be recommenced.

Thus the disaster compelled the expenditure of time and labor and no little money. The stock would of course be depreciated, and Mr. Wedderburn, who just then felt the want of ready cash, saw no further prospect of consummating the favorable bargain which he had hoped to strike with Abijah Duncome.

Consequently, when that gentleman entered the office of the company, a couple of days after the disaster, Mark Wedderburn was not in a good humor.

"Here comes a Job's comforter," he muttered.

It did seem as if the condolence of the gentleman from Massachusetts would take an unpleasant shape, as he at once began to speak about the misfortune.

"I am sorry for you, Wedderburn," said he, "and I am sorry for the mine, which was quite a promising speckilation. Just as you had tided over the strike, and had got a good superintendent, and all things were ready to be put in running order, it is a great pity that things had to be knocked all of a heap by that fire and blow-up."

"Well, I reckon I can stand it," growled Mark Wedderburn.

"I am glad to hear that. But it must be a pull—quite a pull, as I judge. Set-backs of that sort are apt to call for money, and ready cash is scarce in these parts. So I have come to speak to you about the stock I was dickerin' for."

"Humph!" grunted Wedderburn. "You offered little enough values bef' re, and I suppose you are now willing to dou' le the offer backward. How much less than nothing do you want to get the stock for, now?"

"Ain't you a trifle too hasty, friend Wedderburn?"

"Ain't you a bit too previous, friend Duncome, in thinking that I am in a tight pinch and ready to throw away my property? I suppose you are like other Yankees—when you see a chance to make a dollar out of another man's misfortune, you go in."

"I suspect that Yankees don't differ much in that way from other folks. But you may be a leetle mistaken in this Yankee, and you don't seem to ketch hold of my idee. I made you an offer a while ago for the stock we were dickerin' about, and the offer was to hold good for ten days. The ten days are about up, and I came to ask you if you had made up your mind."

Mark Wedderburn was astonished, and at the same time immensely gratified.

"Do you mean to say that you still stick to that offer?" he asked.

"Of course I do."

"Though that accident has happened to the mine, and the stock must go down?"

"Why, Wedderburn, I claim to be a business man, and an honest one. That kind of a man can't go back on his word. The offer was squarely made, to be kept open for ten days, and within that time you have the right to say whether you will accept or reject it."

"I didn't mean to insist on that, Duncome. I expected to have to let you off now."

"I don't ask to be let off. That ain't the way to do business. I have come to get your answer. If you accept it, the money is ready for you."

"Of course I accept it, and we will close the transaction right now."

The transaction was closed, and Mark Wedderburn was highly pleased with the result of the negotiation, which at once placed in his hands all the money that was needed for the development of Last Chance Mine.

He could not sufficiently admire the fine sense of business honor that had led Abijah Duncome, at a serious crisis in the affairs of the mine, when its prospects were far from brilliant, to adhere to and renew the offer he had made under more promising circumstances.

But he soon had reason to change his opinion, and to wonder if he had not been made the victim of a sharp trick by the shrewd and calculating Yankee.

In the course of the work of clearing out the level and renewing the timbers an interesting and highly important discovery was made.

At the point where the heaviest explosion occurred the rock had been shattered, and a vein was discovered which was remarkably rich in paying ore.

This discovery was reported to Mark Wedderburn by Nat Tyrrell, who explained when and how it was made.

"I have no doubt," said the superintendent, "that this vein, which leads off from the one you have been following, is the true fissure vein, as it must be fully twice as large and rich as the other. I can't imagine how they managed to miss it in running the level; but they succeeded in running very close to it without finding it."

The value of the new vein, which was soon fully confirmed, not only changed the course of mining operations, but vastly improved the prospects of Last Chance Mine, sending its stock up like a balloon.

Mark Wedderburn accepted the congratulations that were poured upon him, but quite ungraciously.

He felt himself to be an ill-used man, because he had parted at low figures with a large amount of stock which had since acquired a high value.

He suspected Abijah Duncome of having got a "point" about the new discovery before he renewed his offer, and from whom could he have got it but Nat Tyrrell?

Consequently Mr. Wedderburn had a grievance against both of those men, though a careful investigation showed nothing to confirm his suspicions.

Another of his perplexities was caused by Charley, who besought his uncle's active interference to prevent Nat Tyrrell from depriving him of the affection of Alice Byrd.

That young man had become quite peevish and morose since the disaster at the mine, and his condition was a subject for serious consideration to his uncle, who loved him as "the apple of his eye."

"I can't stand it any longer, uncle Mark," said Charley. "Unless some sort of a change is made before long I shall be likely to do something desperate."

"I hope not, Charley. What is the matter now?"

"Why I can't get so much as a civil word from Alice since that fellow Tyrrell came here. He is after her all the time, or she is after him, and I suppose one of them is as much to blame as the other. Unless there is a stop put to that sort of thing, I don't know what I shall do."

"But what can I do, Charley? If the girl turns against you, I can't make her like you."

"She has promised to marry me, though, and she has got to do it."

"She ought to, of course; but it is her father's business to take care of her, and you should speak to him."

"I have spoken to him, uncle Mark, and so have you, and I have no doubt that he does the best he can; but Tyrrell and Alice seem to have it pretty much their own way, all the same. If that fellow Tyrrell was out of the neighborhood I don't suppose there would be any more trouble to speak of, and you can get rid of him if you want to."

"Get rid of Tyrrell? Well, Charley, I don't profess to be very fond of the man, and I suspect him of having caused me a serious loss in money matters; but he seems to be necessary to the mine just now, and the men have taken to him. Besides, my boy, this is a rather delicate matter. You must remember that he saved your life."

"Perhaps he did, and perhaps he didn't. I think that Miss Duncome had as much to do with that as anybody. Alice says that he saved

her life, too. I am sick and tired of this life-saving business. You can easily pay him for what he did for me. So I think you ought to settle with him and send him away."

Mark Wedderburn frowned. The dose that his dear nephew had given him was too much for even his stomach.

"Tyrrell is hardly the sort of man I would care to offer money to for such a service," he replied. "But I will speak to Mr. Byrd, Charley. As you say, I hold the whip hand there. And—yes, I will speak to Nat Tyrrell, too. That is, I will speak to him as soon as I can get a good chance to bring up the subject and put it in the proper light. You know, Charley, that I would cut off my right hand to please you. But I wish you had set your heart on some other girl."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS WOMAN.

It was morning, but not early morning. To be exact, it lacked an hour of noon.

Sally Mapes sat alone in Zachary Byrd's cabin.

Her face wore a joyful and expectant look, and she was watching closely an earthen pot that stood on the hearth, surrounded by hot ashes, and sending forth a pleasant savor.

At the same time she was listening intently.

It might have been noticed, also, that she was dressed with unusual care, and her hair was neatly arranged, and her homely but not unpleasing face fairly shone.

"Thar they are!" she said, in a tone that spoke of intense gratification. "Thar they are, and nobody down East could cook 'em any nicer. If Mr. Duncome don't tumble to them beans, I'm clean out of my reckonin'. He admires me, too, I do believe, and I don't doubt that his daughter sees it. Well, why shouldn't he? Men have admired me afore he did—a long time afore. I ain't so young as I used to be; but he ain't no chicken, neither. I'm jest achin' for him to come, and seems to me I hear a step outside."

The next moment there was a rap at the door, and Sally started, and her face flushed.

"That's him," she said. "Come in! Come right in!"

Abijah Duncome entered, his face smiling and rosy.

"Good-mornin', Miss Mapes," was his cheery greeting.

Then he stopped, closed the door, and sniffed, while his smile deepened and spread all over his face.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean to say? It can't be."

"Yes, it is," pleasantly replied Sally.

"Not beans?"

"Baked beans, Mr. Duncome."

"I was sure of it. My nose never deceived me yet. Are they really baked?"

"Bosting style."

"Soaked all day?"

"Yes."

"Baked all night?"

"Yes."

"With a fat piece of pickled pork?"

"Yes."

"In a porous pot?"

"YES."

The capitalist from Massachusetts stepped toward the cook from Missouri, and held out his hands.

"Come to my arms, my jewel!" he exclaimed.

"No you don't," replied Sally, waving him off with her long spoon. "Keep your distance, mister. You mustn't be too brash on short acquaintance."

"I was speaking of the beans, Miss Mapes. I want to fold them to my heart."

"They'll git thar, or tharabout, in good time, I reckon. Set right down, Mr. Duncome, and you shall soon see 'em."

He took a seat at the table, and spread his handkerchief on his knees for a napkin, while Sally lifted the pot of beans from the hearth, wiped it, and placed it before him.

She removed the cover, and stepped back to watch the effect.

As the aroma of the beans reached Mr. Duncome's nostrils he rubbed his hands, and audibly expressed his satisfaction.

"This is the real thing. Perfect! My nose never deceives me. Who would hav' thought of finding such a woman in this wild-ness?"

Sally began to transfer the tempting food from the pot to his plate.

"Not so much, my dear Miss Mapes. Just a little at present. I only want to taste them, and then take them down to the camp, if you will allow me that privilege. Do sit down, Miss Mapes. It will look so pleasant and natural like to see you at the table."

Sally seated herself opposite her guest, her face glowing with pleasure as he tasted the beans and pronounced them delicious.

"By the way," he remarked, "did you forget the brown bread?"

"I didn't forget it, sir; but I couldn't git hold of any good Injun jest yet."

"Good Injun? Good Injun?" repeated Mr. Duncome, with a puzzled look. "Why, they say about here that there's no such a thing as a good Injun."

"Injun meal I mean—corn meal, you know."

"Oh, yes; that is what they call it at home. I had forgot. That will come along in good time. You have done wonders as it is. The beans are a great success. My dear Miss Mapes, I feel now, as Theodore Parker used to say, redeemed and regenerated. I am equal to any—what is it?—oleomargarine?"

"Emergency," suggested Sally.

"Bless my soul! You are a wonderful woman. I am glad to see that your education has not been neglected. Yes, I am equal to any emergency. I own a big share in Last Chance Mine now. I shall buy more of it, and I mean to build a house, settle down, and make another fortune right here."

"I hope you will prosper, sir."

"Bound to prosper. But I will need somebody to cook my beans, just as these are cooked, and you are the only woman, my dear Miss Mapes, who can do it to suit me."

He had moved his chair nearer to her, and his remarks had assumed a confidential tone.

"I don't hire out for a cook," blushingly replied Sally.

"Dear me! I wouldn't think of asking you to do that."

"Nor for a housekeeper."

He hitched his chair a little nearer to her, and became more confidential.

"I would hope to find something better than that for you. The fact is, my dear Miss Mapes—Hello! who's this?"

The door of the cabin opened a little suddenly and Mark Wedderburn stepped in.

His face was overcast, and he was clearly not in a good humor with himself or with the world.

Abijah Duncome quickly tilted his chair back, and endeavored, without great success, to look quite unconcerned.

"Good-morning, Miss Mapes," said Wedderburn, "I hope you will excuse me for coming in without knocking; but Zachary Byrd's latch-string always hangs out."

"That's all right, Mr. Wedderburn."

"Why, Duncome, is this really you? What has brought you up here?"

"I just foller'd my nose, and you can see what it brought me to. I've been prospecting, and have struck a rich vein of beans."

"Then you are happy, I suppose. Is Alice Byrd in the house, Miss Mapes?"

"No, sir; she's gone a-walkin'."

"Ah! not alone, I suppose?"

"With her father and Miss Duncome."

"That is well. They will soon be in, I presume. If you please, I will sit down and wait for them."

Mark Wedderburn seated himself in a chair, facing the one window of the cabin, which looked toward the foot of the ledge. But he took no interest in the view, as he sat with his head down, seemingly lost in thought.

Abijah Duncome finished in silence the beans that were on his plate, the pleasure of his interview with Sally Mapes having been spoiled by the arrival of a third person.

As he replaced the top on the bean-pot, there was a knock at the door.

Sally opened it, and admitted John Randolph, who touched his hat to his master.

"What are you doing here, John?" demanded Mr. Duncome.

"Jest nuffin' at all, sah."

"That's about what you are allers doing. As you are here, I will try to make you useful. Take this pot of beans down to the camp, and leave it in my room."

"Yes, sah."

"Mind you don't drop it or look into it. Go right along, and be careful. Have you seen any more ghosts?"

"No, sah."

"Mind you don't see any. Now, trot!"

The darky picked up the pot of beans, and left the house, closing the door behind him.

"It will be the first bit of service I've had from that fellow in a long time, besides blacking boots," remarked Mr. Duncome. "Hello! What's up now?"

This inquiry was provoked by the sudden reappearance of John Randolph, who came running into the cabin without stopping to knock, evidently in a state of extreme terror.

"De ghost!" he faintly answered. "De ghost I done see'd de ghost ag'in. It's comin' heah!"

"Don't drop the beans!" ejaculated Duncome, as he snatched the precious pot from the trembling hands of John Randolph, and placed it on the table.

"You consarned fool! What do you mean by this talk of seeing ghosts in broad daylight? I told you to quit that foolishness. Darn the ghost!"

"Dar it is!" shrieked John.

He pointed at the window, and dropped helplessly on the floor.

Duncome looked instantly where the darky pointed, and plainly saw a woman pass the window, at a distance of perhaps thirty yards from the cabin.

As she was on the slope of the ridge, her entire person was not visible; but it could be seen that she was coarsely clad, and that her garments were shabby and tattered. Her dark

hair hung loose, and her face, which was for an instant turned toward the cabin, appeared to be deathly pale, and had a wild look, suggestive of insanity.

Sally Mapes, who was occupied in the far corner of the room, did not see her as she passed.

Mark Wedderburn saw her, and the effect upon him was startling.

"My God!" he shrieked, as he sunk back in his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Did you see it, Mr. Duncome?" asked Sally.

"Yes."

"What did it look like?"

"It was a woman—a live woman, of course. She looked like a crazy woman."

"I'm going out to see who she is."

"So am I."

They both stepped out quietly, and walked to the end of the house, and went down the slope, and looked around, but saw no woman.

They went a little way into the timber, and looked again, but saw no person whatever.

Sally Mapes, who claimed to be something of a trailer, examined the slope where the woman was supposed to have passed, but could find no signs there except those which their own feet had left.

They returned to the house, deeply impressed by the mystery of the occurrence.

CHAPTER XIX.

NAT TYRELL IS DULY WARNED.

Not until Abijah Duncome and Sally Mapes had left the house did Mark Wedderburn raise his head, and when he did so there was a scared look on his face.

"Has she gone?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"I hope so, sah," feebly responded John Randolph, as he rose from the floor.

Neither of them spoke again until the two searchers returned and reported that they had seen no woman outside.

"But there was surely something that passed the window," said Mark Wedderburn. "Did you both see it?"

"I did," replied Duncome.

"Was it a woman?"

"It looked like a woman, and at first I was sure it was a woman; but now I don't know. I can't see how a sure enough live woman could have got away so quick. Ah! here is Mr. Byrd. I will ask him to set his head to work on the matter."

As Zachary Byrd entered the house, he noticed something strange in the appearance of those present, and inquired what was the matter.

"Did you see anything in the shape of a woman as you came to the house, Mr. Byrd?" asked Duncome.

"A woman? Nothing of the kind. I have seen no woman but Miss Duncome and my daughter Alice."

"No stray woman, or strange woman, or anything of the sort?"

"Nothing at all. Have you seen such a woman?"

"Well, we have seen something. John Randolph, here, saw a strange woman some time ago, and he said it was a ghost. Right here he saw it again. It passed out yonder, and I saw it through the window, and Mr. Wedderburn saw it, too. She looked like a crazy woman. Do you know whether any such creature has been seen wandering about the woods?"

Zachary Byrd shook his head.

"It is very strange. If there is such a woman, I should think she would have been seen, and I don't know how she could pick up a living in the woods. Durned if I can make it out."

"It can't have been a woman," broke in Mark Wedderburn. "It must have been a delusion. Where did you leave the girls, Mr. Byrd?"

"Not far from here. Down at the deep spring."

"I will go and find them," said Duncome, "if Miss Mapes will show me the way. Come along, John Randolph, and bring the beans. It seems that you have told the truth for once, and that sp'les you for politics."

Sally was quite willing to show the way to the spring, and Mark Wedderburn and Zachary Byrd were left in the cabin.

The former was clearly in a bad humor, and his frown had a depressing effect upon the latter.

"What was that about a woman, Mr. Wedderburn?" the old man ventured to ask.

"Just what you have heard. There was nothing in it. There can't have been anything in it. A mere fancy, I suppose. Let it drop. I walked out this way, thinking I might meet Nat Tyrrell, as I want to have a talk with him. Does your daughter seem to be very partial to him?"

"I am sorry to say that she does."

"That is what my nephew tells me. He says that he hardly ever gets a civil word from her nowadays. Poor Charley! He has so set his heart upon her."

"You must know, Mr. Wedderburn, that Alice has had a pretty good education, and she has been reading lots of story books, and I

reckon she has got romantic notions into her head."

"Well, well, we must do the best we can. If this Tyrrell will promise to go away from here, I will find good business for him elsewhere. If not, I must discharge him from my employment. But you must do what you can, Byrd. Remember that there is a matter of money between us."

"I will do the best I can with Alice, sir. But Nat Tyrrell has done me a great service, and I don't want to try to rub his fur the wrong way."

"You may be sure that I am not afraid of him," said Mark Wedderburn, as he left the house.

As he walked down the slope and turned into the mountain path, the frown on his face grew darker, and he moved nervously, casting a troubled glance every now and then at the woods on either side.

"Of course I am not afraid of him," he muttered, communing with himself. "Why should I be afraid of him or of any other man? But that apparition, or whatever it was, upset me. It sent a chill over me, and seemed like a shadow of coming evil. What if that girl should be alive, and should have wandered to this remote region? But it is impossible. If I were troubled with a conscience, I would be badly worried; but I got rid of that incumbrance some time ago."

He was so absorbed in his meditations that he did not notice the approach of another person until he was startled by meeting him in the path.

"You seem to be in a brown study, Mr. Wedderburn," said that person.

"Ah, Mr. Tyrrell! I am glad to meet you. Yes, I was in a brown study—so brown that it was almost black. Will you walk toward the camp with me? I have something to say to you. I have not yet had a chance to tell you how highly I appreciate your bravery and generosity in saving my nephew from his great peril in the mine."

"I hope you won't make too much of that, sir," responded Nat. "It was a small matter to me."

"It was a great matter to him, and I hope that you, who have done him so great a service, are not going to be the means of breaking his heart."

"As how?" innocently inquired Nat.

"I suppose you know, Mr. Tyrrell, that my nephew Charles is engaged to be married to Alice Byrd."

"Her father has told me so often enough."

"Doubtless he has wished to impress that fact upon your mind, because he was afraid that you had designs upon his daughter."

"Designs?" repeated Tyrrell, in a tone which showed that the word was distasteful to him. "What do you mean by designs?"

"He was afraid that it was your intention to try to win her affection for yourself, while her hand was promised to another."

"I understand you, Mr. Wedderburn, and I hope you will understand me. You speak of my designs and intentions. How few of us there are who know what they are going to do in this world, or who do what they desire or intend to do. I expected to be at my dinner at this hour; but you find me here. The owners of Last Chance intended to take a pile of money out of the mine this season; but the strike and the fire upset their calculations. Then they supposed that the expenses would eat up the profits; but the discovery of a better vein put a new face on that matter. You expect to live long and lay up riches; but before the week ends you may be cold and dead."

Mark Wedderburn was puzzled and displeased. He was not accustomed to that kind of talk, and the last remark was especially distasteful.

"What does all that philosophy amount to?" he asked.

"Much," answered Tyrrell. "I say that I have ceased to harbor designs and intentions, because I know how worthless they are; because I know that we are continually doing those things which we mean not to do, and leaving undone those things which we fully intend to do. If that girl's love comes to me, it comes not because it is sought, but because it is sent, and I am not the man to refuse what is sent, whether it is good or evil."

"You are rather too much of a philosopher for me. If I understand you rightly, you mean that you will try to win the love of Alice Byrd."

"I mean that if her love comes to me I will gladly receive it. I have not had so many good gifts in this life that I could afford to throw such a priceless one away."

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Tyrrell, that unless you change your tone, you will not be likely to continue in your present relation to Last Chance Mine."

Tyrrell stopped, and there was an angry flush in his cheeks as he faced the man who had insinuated that he could be bought off from Alice Byrd.

"What do you take me for?" he demanded. "Money may be all the world to you, but it is

a small matter to me. It was not your pay that brought me here, but the trail of a scoundrel."

This statement seemed to be intensely and painfully interesting to Mark Wedderburn, who looked at Tyrrell strangely.

"What trail?" he asked. "What scoundrel?"

"Mr. Wedderburn, like you I have only one relation in the world; but that is a sister. A few years ago she was enticed from her home by a heartless villain. Ever since I have sought that man, and the trail has at last led me here. It is a blind trail as yet, but is getting clearer."

It could be seen with half an eye that Mr. Wedderburn was deeply moved, and Nat Tyrrell, who had two good eyes, and who was watching him closely, must have supposed that his emotion was hardly justified by his interest in the subject.

His color came and went under Tyrrell's steady gaze, and his hands trembled, and his eyes sought the ground.

"That is a sad story, sir," he said at last. "But perhaps you take your trouble too much to heart."

"Perhaps I have no business to have a heart," rejoined Tyrrell.

"Such cases are not at all rare, and it is sometimes the fault of the woman, you know."

"It was never the fault of that woman, Mr. Wedderburn."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," is written in the Good Book."

"Those who quote Scripture should follow its teachings. For my part, I make no pretense of following them."

"If you persist in tearing open a wound, it can have no chance to heal."

"In some parts of the country," sternly replied Tyrrell, "it is said that when a snake has bit you it is useless to apply any remedy for the poison until the snake has been killed. When I find my snake, the wound will have a chance to heal."

"Mr. Tyrrell, I have no sympathy with such high-flown heroics. They are not businesslike, and I don't pretend to understand them. To me your sentiments seem to be simply murderous. I hope you will reflect upon the matter I have mentioned to you, and will shortly come to a better conclusion. Good-day, sir."

Though Mark Wedderburn started off with such a flourish, he did not succeed in putting himself at his ease. He walked away rapidly, but with a trembling and uncertain step, and the frown did not leave his face.

"I will reflect upon you, man of the soft tongue and the flinty heart!" said Tyrrell, as he looked after Wedderburn's receding form. "How easily he slurred over that foul wrong and my desire for a righteous vengeance! Could any man so easily find excuses for crime, unless he was accustomed to crime—unless he had committed the very crime that he seeks to excuse? Who is this man and what is his past? His name is Mark Wedderburn, and that man's name was Marshall Walters; but it may have been assumed. The initials are the same, and the nature is the same, and in some respects he fits the description. Yes, I will reflect upon you, Mark Wedderburn."

CHAPTER XX.

THE LION IN LOVE.

CERTAIN affairs in connection with Last Chance Mine were approaching a crisis.

Mark Wedderburn informed his nephew that he had spoken to Nat Tyrrell plainly and firmly concerning Alice Byrd, and had warned him that his position would be in danger unless he changed his course in that quarter.

At the same time he advised Charley to press his suit upon Alice without any loss of time and to urge her to set a near day for the marriage.

"If the affair between her and Tyrrell has gone as far as I fear it has," said he, "she will put you off or refuse to marry you. In that case I will discharge Tyrrell at once. I am getting more and more displeased with the man and shall not hesitate. I will not consult with Abijah Duncome, either. He seems to be quite friendly to the new superintendent, and I suspect him of having been paid for his partiality."

"But if Tyrrell is discharged, will he go away?" queried Charley.

"That remains to be seen. If he persists in hanging around, I think I can find a way to make things unpleasant for him. But you must go ahead and do your part, my boy."

So Charley Wedderburn visited Alice, and in his usual style invited her to walk with him.

As her father's orders were to that effect, she went, though somewhat reluctantly.

Charley urged his suit with all the eloquence he was capable of, and begged her to name a near day for their marriage.

When she answered evasively he became excited and reproachful, and incidentally he spoke disparagingly of Nat Tyrrell.

Alice at once flamed up in Tyrrell's defense, declaring again that he had saved her life.

"Why do you always spring that on me,

Alice?" asked her affianced. "I am tired of this talk about life-saving."

"I should think you would be glad to hear it," she replied. "I am sure that I never get tired of telling how he saved my life when we were attacked by the Indians. It was just before daybreak, and we were awakened by the firing of guns and the most horrible yells, and all of a sudden the camp was thrown into frightful confusion. Two men of our party had fallen, and father, badly wounded, was fighting desperately against hopeless odds. Sally Mapes had shot down an Indian, and stood before my wagon, swinging her rifle, and keeping back a crowd of horrid, painted, yelling savages."

"Then Nat Tyrrell burst in, as if God had sent him, with a pistol in each hand, and he fired faster than I could count, and the Indians melted away like mist, and we were saved. Oh, it was splendid! I would almost be willing to go through the danger once more, to see it again."

"You are very enthusiastic about it, Alice."

"How was it with you? Tell me how he found you in the burning mine, and picked you up and carried you through the smothering smoke and the blazing timbers, while the stones were falling around him, and the flames were scorching the fearful kegs of powder."

"Of course I knew nothing about that," replied the young man. "You seem to forget that I was insensible."

"Have you been insensible ever since? You might have found out something about it if you had cared to."

"Perhaps I had better send that man Tyrrell to tell you the story."

"I wish you would."

"Do you admire him so much?"

"How can I help it? If I had been born a boy, I could wish for nothing better than to become such a man."

"I am tired of hearing his praises from your lips. Have you not promised to marry me, Alice?"

"I ought to be able to remember that, as you remind me of it often enough."

"You have been trifling with me for some time. I will see your father, and ask him how long this is to last."

"You will urge him to keep his promise, and he will be easily persuaded."

"More easily than you can be, I suppose. Alice, I must speak to you plainly! Your infatuation for Tyrrell is apparent to everybody who knows anything about you. Do you know that it may cause him to lose his position as superintendent of the mine? My uncle is very much displeased, and has told me so."

She stepped away from him, turned, and confronted him with flashing eyes.

"Charles Wedderburn!" she angrily exclaimed, "do you know what you are saying? Do you want me to despise you? Would you suffer the man who saved your life to be treated with such injustice for such a cause? Go, sir!—go!—before I say something that I might regret."

"I didn't think you would take it that way," he sulkily answered. "I am quite willing to go; but I must see you safe home."

At this moment Cessie Duncome opportunely appeared on the scene, rescuing Alice a second time from what promised to be a very unpleasant quarter of an hour.

"There is no need of that, Mr. Wedderburn," said the sprightly young lady. "I will take care of her."

"I will gladly leave her in your hands, Miss Duncome," he politely replied.

"Of course you will. She will be entirely safe with me. Run right along, now; that's a good fellow."

Charley Wedderburn did not run, but quietly walked off, much displeased at the result of his effort, and glad to get away.

"He has gone like a good fellow," said Alice, with a pout; "but he is not a good fellow, Cessie. He is a mean, cowardly—"

"Tut, tut, child. He is a good fellow enough, as young fellows go, and if you can get rid of him I will be glad to take him off your hands."

"Will you, Cessie dear? Oh, I do so wish you could. He is really a nice fellow in his place; but he and I have never got on together, and we never could."

"Yes, he is a good fellow; but he is on the wrong track just now. He would suit me, because I want a husband whom I can manage, you know, and a slight deficiency of backbone would really be a recommendation to me. Perhaps we can help each other in this business, Alice."

"I hope and pray that we can. What shall we do first?"

"The first thing will be for you to put your foot down squarely, and say that you won't marry him."

"I don't want to marry him, Cessie dear. I never did. My father made the match, and I just accepted it as a matter of course. There is some money business between him and Mark Wedderburn that is mixed up with it."

"So, so!" said Cessie, with a genuine whistle.

"I would pity the man who is under Mark

Wedderburn's thumb in money matters. I must have a confab with your father, Alice. But I am forgetting what brought me here."

"Why didn't you come to see me?"

"Yes, but for a purpose, and it was to carry out that purpose that I sent Charley Wedderburn whirling. Alice, there is a friend of yours waiting near by, and he begged me to manage to get him an interview with you."

The color came into Alice's cheeks, and she blushed again as she looked up and saw Nat Tyrrell slowly approaching.

"I see him, Cessie," she whispered.

"Yes, it is Mr. Tyrrell. I will leave you now, dear Alice; but I will not go far away."

"Oh, you are so good!"

Miss Duncome lightly and gracefully tripped away, and Tyrrell eagerly came forward.

As he met Alice, he took the blushing girl's hand, and she did not withdraw it.

"Did you say that I might come to you?" he asked. "Can this be true?"

"It ought not to be true; but it is," meekly answered Alice.

"Again I can see you face to face, and listen to the music of your voice. If I could die to the sound of that music, I would feel sure of going straight to heaven."

"That is too much to say, Mr. Tyrrell. I am afraid it is wicked."

"I hope it is not; but so many years of my wandering life have been spent in no company but that of the roughest and worst of men, that I hardly know what to say or how to say it. I wish you would teach me."

"How can I teach you?" asked Alice. "You seem to me to be a man who must be able to teach everybody everything."

"I am rude and coarse in my speech and my ways. When I am with you, I am nothing but a muddy pond, reflecting the image of a star. I am no better than an awkward bear, that tries to pluck a flower, and crushes it in his clumsy paw."

"I am sure that you talk very nicely," she answered. "I do not know what I could teach you."

"You can teach me, if I love a girl—a fair and sweet girl like yourself—how to tell her that I love her."

"If you love her well and truly, it must be easy to tell her so. It seems to me that the plainest and bluntest way would be the best, as it is the most likely to be honest."

"What shall I say, then?"

"Just that—that you love her. It ought to be enough for her. But she should be here. You could not say it to another."

Of course the girl knew what was coming. Tyrrell's ardent gaze must have told her that, and she cast down her eyes before him.

"She is here!" he said. "I need not tell it to another. She is right here. As her image is always in my heart, so is she now before me in person."

"Do you really mean me?" whispered a small and trembling voice.

"I mean you, Alice," he answered as he took her hand again. "Hear me say that I love you."

She turned away her face, and was silent.

"Have I done wrong, Alice?"

She did not take away her hand, and at last she spoke.

"I ought to be sorry; but I am so glad."

"Then it is worth while to live, and the world is fit to live in."

As she released herself from the embrace that followed, a cloud came over her fair face.

"I am afraid, Nat, that there is a great deal of trouble before us."

"We will not worry about that now. Sufficient for the day is the blessing thereof."

CHAPTER XXI.

NAT TYRRELL MUST GO.

SALLY MAPES was fretted by the long absence of Alice from her home.

At first she thought that there was no occasion for grumbling for the girl had gone with Charley Wedderburn. But she reflected that those two were not then on the best possible terms, and the chances were that they had quarreled.

It was possible that Charley might have gone off in a huff, and that Alice might have met Nat Tyrrell.

On the whole, Sally concluded that she ought to go and look after her charge.

So she locked the house, and descended the ridge, following the course which she supposed Charley and Alice to have taken.

The first person she met was Miss Duncombe, who was seated on a log in the forest, not exactly like patience on a monument, but somewhat in that line of business.

Her presence in that place and that attitude struck Sally as being suspicious, and she proceeded to "tackle" the young lady.

"I am looking for Alice, Miss Duncombe. Have you seen her lately?"

"I saw her not far from here awhile ago, with young Mr. Wedderburn. I suppose she is somewhere about."

"Is she alone?"

"I should say that she is not. She was not alone when I left her."

"Who is with her?"

Whatever end Celerity may have had to gain, she was not going to try to gain it by lying. And she answered this point-blank question honestly.

"Mr. Tyrrell is with her now, I believe."

"Mr. Tyrrell! And you knew it, Miss Duncome, and didn't stop it?"

"Why should I?"

"Well, I must go and stop it."

"Please don't bother her, Miss Mapes. Let her be happy for a moment."

"Happy, indeed! Her father would be mad as a hornet, if he knew it. I don't wonder at you, Miss Duncome. I keep my eyes open, and generally understand what's goin' on. But I must see to Alice."

"Wait a moment!" urged Celerity, as Sally started off. "You don't know what you are doing, Miss Mapes."

Sally thought she did know what she was doing, and hurried away. Miss Duncome started to run after her, but thought better of it, and resumed her seat on the log.

It was easy for Sally to find Alice Byrd and Nat Tyrrell, as they were near at hand, and when she saw them she raised her hands in horror, if not in astonishment.

"Mercy on us!" she exclaimed. "Kissin', as I'm a sinner! This is worse than murder."

She ran toward them, and at her approach they separated, though Tyrrell did not lose his hold of the girl's hand.

"Is it here you are, Alice Byrd?" she demanded. "And with Mr. Tyrrell, too? What sort of goin's on is this? Supposin' your father should come here and find you."

"I must go home, Nat," said Alice, without looking at Sally. "I am afraid that my father will be very angry."

"Keep a brave heart, my dear, and trust to me," answered Nat, as again he folded her in a loving embrace.

"Snakes alive!" exclaimed Sally. "Right afore my face! Alice Byrd, come home at once!"

All three of them were surprised, and at least two of them were considerably taken aback, by the appearance of Zachary Byrd.

He had been coming up the valley, and had seen what Sally had seen, and he could not help comprehending the situation.

An explosion of wrath was expected; but his clouded countenance showed grief rather than anger, and he spoke calmly and sorrowfully.

"Let her stay where she is, Sally. This business must be settled here and now. So, Mr. Tyrrell, in spite of my warnings and precautions, you have crept into my family and stolen my daughter's love."

"I have neither crept nor stolen," replied Nat. "I have walked erect, as an honest man may walk, and have only taken what God has given me."

"I am not here to argue with you, sir. This affair has gone beyond argument, and it means nothing less than ruin to me."

"Ruin, father?" exclaimed Alice, pressing to his side and seizing his hand.

"Complete and utter ruin, coming upon me in my old age, when I am no longer able to strive against it."

"What do you mean, father? I was afraid that there might be trouble; but I do not understand this."

"I will tell you, so that both of you may understand it, and then you may leave me to my fate if you will. I have a considerable sum of money, the savings of a lifetime, and all I possess in the world, invested in Last Chance Mine, and am an owner of its stock to that extent. Not long ago I was obliged to raise a certain amount, and I borrowed the sum I needed from Mark Wedderburn, giving him my Last Chance stock as security.

The business is in such a shape that if I fail to pay what I owe the stock is forfeited to Mark Wedderburn, and I can never redeem it. If I can hold it, in the present prospects of the mine, it must soon become worth twice its face value. If it must be sacrificed now, I will be completely and utterly ruined, and I am too old to begin the world again. The debt is nearly due, and as yet I have not the means to meet my obligation."

"Would Mark Wedderburn be mean enough to take such an advantage of you?" inquired Tyrrell.

"A business man of his stripe considers nothing mean that is done according to contract and in the regular course of business."

"I should not have asked such a question, Mr. Byrd. I have reason to believe that Mark Wedderburn is the very man who would do that very thing."

"What can I do, father?" asked Alice. "What can Mr. Tyrrell do?"

"As you see, I am at Mark Wedderburn's mercy," replied her father. "He knows it, and has used the power he holds to persuade me to urge your marriage with his nephew. You can judge how he will continue to use it. I am also at the mercy of you and Mr. Tyrrell. If

your engagement to Charley Wedderburn is broken now, that means ruin to me, and I am an old man."

"And I am a poor man," said Nat Tyrrell, "though I might have been a rich man if I had taken 'em chances that have come in my way. I have strong arms and a stout heart, but am counted as worth nothing."

Sally Mapes, who had been quietly sobbing in sympathy with Alice, dropped her apron and raised her head. The time had come for one of her practical and sensible suggestions.

"Tell you what, folks," said she; "supposin' you let this thing rest awhile. Supposin' Mr. Tyrrell goes away for a bit."

"That is the point," replied Zachary Byrd. "If he will leave the camp much trouble may be avoided."

Alice looked at the old man solemnly.

"Father," she said, "do you want me to marry a man for whom I care nothing, when there is one whom I really love?"

"I do not ask that of you, my child. I have no wish to force your inclinations, since I have learned where they are fixed and how strong they are. I only ask for time. If Mr. Tyrrell goes away, Mark Wedderburn will not press me, and Charley can easily be put off. Then I will have a chance to look around, and may be able to pay my debt and save myself, and that will be better for all of us."

"What shall I do, Alice?" asked Nat.

"How can I say? I cannot bear to lose you, nor can I ruin my dear old father."

"Then I must decide. You ask a great sacrifice of me, Mr. Byrd."

"God will bless you, sir, for the mercy you show to a broken old man."

"There is but one blessing in the world for me, and that I must abandon as soon as I have found it. I must shut my eyes to the only light that has dawned upon my darkened life. It is like tearing my heart out; but I must go. Come to me once more Alice, that I may know that you belong to me."

She rushed to his embrace, and there was no person to hinder them.

"As it is a matter of money that separates us," said Tyrrell, "I will go and scramble with the rest for that which I have never cared to pick up when it lay at my feet. I will start the men at the mine to-morrow, Mr. Byrd, and then I will leave Last Chance camp. After to-day, Alice, I will see you no more until—until—"

"Until you return I will be true to you," broke in Alice—"until you return."

"Till then, farewell!"

CHAPTER XXII.

ALL TO BE SETTLED TO-MORROW.

As Nat Tyrrell passed out of sight, Alice Byrd trembled, wavering on her feet, and would have fallen if her father had not supported her.

"Come to her, Sally," said he, "I am afraid she is fainting."

Celerity Duncome, who had been gradually approaching the group, ran to Alice at once.

"Not a bit of it!" exclaimed that young lady. "If there is any fainting to be done, I will do it, as it is in my line. Come, Alice, let me take you home, and all will be well yet."

She led Alice away toward the house, followed by Mr. Duncome and Sally.

Hardly had they disappeared when two men emerged from a small ravine near by.

They were Rube Hatcher and Violet, and Hatcher's face wore a triumphant look, while Violet was as sulky and stupid as usual.

"Did you see all that, Violet?" demanded Rube.

"Plain enough."

"Did you hear it?"

"Reckon my ears is big enough."

"Let's go and find Mark Wedderburn. I reckon this will settle Nat Tyrrell's business as superintendent of Last Chance Mine."

"I don't want to fool with Nat Tyrrell no more," protested Violet.

"You had better not try to fool with me, my lad. Come right along."

Violet was compelled to follow, and Rube Hatcher led the way to the camp and to the office of the mining company.

Mark Wedderburn was not in; but Charley was there alone, and Hatcher proceeded to make his business known.

"We war looking for the old gentleman," said he; "but I reckon you will do, as what we've got to tell is something you ought to know. It is about Nat Tyrrell and a young lady."

Charley was at once intensely interested, and when Hatcher intimated that he would expect to be paid for his information, he signified his willingness to respond to any reasonable demands.

"We came across 'em out in the hills," said Rube, "and we saw Nat Tyrrell and that young lady kissing and hugging each other, and Zach Bird was looking on, and there was a heap said among 'em, and we can give it to you straight."

At Charley's request he told the entire story, detailing pretty fully the conversation to which he had listened, with the exception of Zachary Byrd's explanation of money matters, which he

had not clearly comprehended. That part, however, young Wedderburn could readily understand.

"I want to be sure," said Charley, "that all this is exactly true."

"I'll take my Bible oath to it," replied Hatcher. "Ain't it all true, Violet?"

"I heerd all that Rube heerd, and I see'd all that Rube see'd," responded Violet.

The young man paid them liberally for their bad news, and they went away rejoicing.

"This has been a good bit of business," remarked Rube. "We can brag on this, Violet. We've put a spider in Nat Tyrrell's dumpling, and have been well paid for it."

"We've got the money, anyhow. Let's go an' git drunk."

Charley Wedderburn was then anxious to see his uncle, and impatiently awaited his arrival.

When Mark Wedderburn came in the story was repeated to him as it had been received from Rube Hatcher, and Charley demanded that immediate measures should be taken for his protection and the disposal of Nat Tyrrell.

"You are right, my boy," replied his uncle. "I propose to act in the matter without any delay. I have become thoroughly tired of that fellow Tyrrell, and I consider him a dangerous man in every respect. You say that he intends to leave the camp. Perhaps he does, and perhaps he does not. If he does leave the camp, he sha'n't go off with flying colors, I promise you. I shall make a point of discharging him at the mine to-morrow morning, in the presence of the men."

"That will be likely to take him down a peg or two," remarked the young man.

"I mean that it shall. You say, Charley, that Zach Byrd asked them only to give him time. I will give him time—a hard time. I will attend to his case, and will let him know where he stands. I will see him to-morrow, after Tyrrell's discharge, and will tell him that the marriage must come off immediately. I was not very eager for it before, but since the opposition has taken this shape, I will put my foot down, once for all. To-morrow, Charley, the affair will be settled to your satisfaction—trust me for that."

That night Celerity Duncome had an interview with her father in his room at the Last Chance Hotel.

She had made up her mind as to what ought to be done, and proceeded to lay down the law to him.

"Now, pa," said she, "I want you to tear your mind loose from beans and beanpots for a while, and from mines and mining, too, and try to think of something that will help somebody."

"Anything to please you, my dear child."

"Then I want you to take some money and pay Mark Wedderburn whatever Zachary Byrd owes him, and get the old man's stock for him. Then Alice will be free to marry Nat Tyrrell, and she won't be obliged to marry Charley Wedderburn."

"Have you any personal interest in that matter, Celerity?"

"Bother that name! You know that I have a personal interest in it. If Charley Wedderburn can't have Alice—and it is obstinacy more than anything else that makes him so set on that marriage—he will be glad enough to take me, and I will be glad enough to get him. Then, pa, I will be off your hands, you know, and you may provide a step mother as soon as you please."

"A step-mother!" exclaimed Abijah Duncome, while his face turned as red as a peony.

"Oh, I am not blind, and you know it. I can't cook your beans to suit you, as Sally Mapes can; but, if you want to have your beans and your bean-pot, and your nice brown bread, you had better do as I tell you. You please me, and I will please you—that's all."

"My dear child, I will do everything I possibly can to please you. I will inquire the amount of Zachary Byrd's debt, and I will see Mark Wedderburn, and the business shall be arranged to suit you to-morrow."

To-morrow again! Who can tell what the morrow may bring forth?

CHAPTER XXIII.

"TO-MORROW."

THE morrow, which was expected to witness the discharge of Nat Tyrrell as superintendent of Last Chance Mine, and the payment of Zachary Byrd's debt to Mark Wedderburn, was also the day that had been set for the resumption of regular mining operations.

The strikers had all "come in," and had been doing excellent work under Tyrrell's superintendence; but all that had been accomplished thus far was the clearing up of the level and the repairing of the damages that had been caused by the fire and the explosions.

On that day it was intended to begin taking out rock from the newly-discovered vein, and great were the expectations of the ore it would yield.

In the morning the men collected at the mouth of the mine with their tools, and awaited the

arrival of the superintendent, who was to direct their work.

Bob Bringhurst, as the oldest man and the oldest miner among them, congratulated his comrades upon their early arrival, upon the satisfactory settlement of their difficulties, and upon the brilliant prospects of Last Chance Mine.

"You say right, old man," replied Jim Allen. "We are all glad that the trouble is settled, and I am free to own that I would rather work under Nat Tyrrell than any man living."

"I am with you there," said Bill Branch. "The man who went into that hole and brought Charley Wedderburn up out of the blaze and the smoke is the sort that will do to bet on."

"I can say for Montana Nat," remarked Vermont, "that though he stands over his men, he can always be relied on to stand by them."

"And they will stand by him, too," joined in Blackjack.

"Well, boys," said Bringhurst, "we have got the level straightened up at last, and I reckon it will be well worth while to pitch into the new vein. For my part, I am just achin' to get at it, and I wish Mr. Tyrrell would come. I wonder why he don't show up."

"Here he comes," said Jim Allen, "and he is looking as solemn as a Gospel-sharp at a first-class funeral."

"That's so, boys," remarked Vermont. "I am keen to bet that there is going to be trouble for somebody before the day is ended. Montana Nat don't put on that black look for nothing."

The appearance of Nat Tyrrell, as he came to the mouth of the mine, was such as to justify what had been said about his look.

It was not only the frown that had gathered on his brow—that was nothing new with the man—so much as the expression of settled gloom that covered his face and showed in his bearing. He looked like a man with whom the world had gone wrong, who was at odds with fortune, and who would be likely to make it unpleasant for any person who should cross his path when he was in his black mood.

But he brightened up as he met the miners, or endeavored to do so, and greeted them cordially.

"I am glad to see that you are all on hand," said he, "and that I am the only man who is late. You must make things move lively today, if you want to see what the new vein is worth, and to bring the Last Chance out from under the cloud."

"That is just what we mean to do," replied Bob Bringhurst.

"I have no doubt of it. You have done very good work in straightening up the level, and I believe you will continue to do well. Vermont, I want to speak with you. By the way, why do they call you Vermont?"

"Because I was born and raised in Texas, I reckon."

"I have heard worse reasons. You understand this part of the work, Vermont, and you and I have talked over what we expect to do. You may lead the gang, if you will. I shall not go into the mine just yet, and perhaps not today."

"Hope you ain't sick," suggested Vermont.

"I am feeling out of sorts, I must confess."

"Sorry to hear that, sir. Hullo! here comes the boss of bosses."

Mark Wedderburn was accompanied by his nephew, Abijah Duncome and Zachary Byrd following them at a little distance.

He carried himself rather more stiffly than usual, and his face wore a look of stern determination, perhaps mingled with triumph.

"This looks like business," said he, as he responded to the greeting of the miners. "Are you all ready to go to work?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bob Bringhurst. "We are anxious to get inside of the new vein, and we have all agreed that the new superintendent suits us right well."

The time had come for Mark Wedderburn to strike his blow, and he had no hesitation in delivering it straight from the shoulder, though he first stole a sidelong glance at Nat Tyrrell, who was standing near him, gazing gloomily at the mouth of the mine.

"That is more than I can say for the company," he said. "The managers have discovered that Mr. Tyrrell does not deserve their confidence, and have determined to dismiss him. He is no longer superintendent here."

This speech was received with a chorus of groans from the assembled miners.

"My nephew," continued Mr. Wedderburn, "will oversee the work until a suitable man can be procured for superintendent."

The chorus of groans became a chorus of howls, fairly proving the displeasure of the miners at the change. It also showed that they were not unacquainted with the true position of affairs. The relations of Alice Byrd to Charley Wedderburn and Nat Tyrrell had been canvassed in the camp, and what was not actually known was guessed at.

Tyrrell turned and faced Mark Wedderburn.

There was no appearance of anger in his countenance, but the same look of settled gloom which he had brought to the mine that morning.

"Have you any reason to give for this sudden change, Mr. Wedderburn?" he quietly inquired.

"The reason I have stated is sufficient," was the curt reply.

"It is not the truth. Your real reason is a mean, sneaking and shameful one, which you are afraid to confess. If your nephew there can indorse your action, I have my opinion of the putty he is made of."

"You will not gain anything by quarreling with me and my nephew. You are discharged, and that ends the matter."

"Ain't you a leetle hasty, friend Wedderburn?" asked Abijah Duncome. "I think you might have consulted me before taking such a step."

"You have no more rights in the matter than any other stockholder."

"That may be; but I ought to be considered. I am afraid something has happened to rile you. Folks who don't git their nateral and healthy food are apt to be easily riled. Come to my room and eat a plate of baked beans with me, and let's talk the business over."

"I am in no mood for nonsense, Mr. Duncome, and there is no business to talk over. It is settled. I am the president and general manager of the company, and I have discharged that man for sufficient cause, and there is nothing more to be said about it."

Another chorus of groans and howls from the miners showed that they might have something to say about it in time.

Tyrrell turned upon Mark Wedderburn, who shrank back before his fierce eyes and his dark look.

"And who are you that give me my discharge?" he demanded. "I care nothing for the position which you think so valuable. I meant to resign it to-day and leave the camp. But I am not a man to be ticked out of anything. Who are you, I say? You may have a score to settle with me yet, before I am through with you. What secret sin is there on your conscience that makes you afraid to look an honest man in the face?"

"You need not try to bully me," stubbornly replied Mark Wedderburn. "I have had enough of your insolence."

"Insolence? If you are what I suspect you of being, your presence in this world is a continual insult to humanity. Your name is Mark Wedderburn. Were you ever known by another name?"

Mark Wedderburn cowered under the fierce words and threatening looks of his accuser.

"What do you mean?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"Did you ever call yourself Marshall Walters?" thundered Tyrrell. "I told you once that I had followed the trail of a scoundrel, and that it led me here. Has it led me to you? What has come over you, man? Why do you stand and shiver and look away from me?"

There was cause enough, as was apparent to everybody who looked in the direction in which Mark Wedderburn was blankly staring, and as was soon vividly apparent to Nat Tyrrell.

It was a woman.

A woman with coarse and tattered garments, her long hair streaming, her face deathly pale, and a wild look in her eyes that told of an unbalanced brain.

The ghost that had scared John Randolph.

The woman who had been seen by Abijah Duncome and Mark Wedderburn through the window of Zachary Byrd's cabin.

Mark Wedderburn saw her again, and the sight turned him numb and dumb.

She tottered, rather than ran, but came forward swiftly, and threw up her hands as she approached Mark Wedderburn.

"Marshall!" she shrieked. "Marshall! I have found you at last!"

"Rose!" exclaimed Nat Tyrrell. "My sister! How came you here?"

"Alive, and his sister!" muttered Mark Wedderburn. "This is what I feared."

The woman ran to Mark Wedderburn, and threw her arms around his neck before he could prevent her.

"Marshall!" she exclaimed. "Why did you leave me to die of shame and sorrow?"

Mark Wedderburn was beside himself with astonishment and shame and rage.

He tore the woman's arms from his neck and violently dashed her to the ground.

He did not look down to note the effect of his mad act, nor did he attempt to escape. Nat Tyrrell's eye and voice held him to the spot.

"Marshall Walters!" said Tyrrell, calmly and coldly. "It is you, then, as I had suspected. You are the scoundrel who destroyed my sister, and now you have slain her."

"It is not so," desperately screamed Wedderburn. "I swear that I do not know that woman."

"Liar! Do you want to go out of the world with a perjury on your lips? This is the end of the trail."

Mark Wedderburn hastily endeavored to draw a pistol, but Tyrrell's weapon was already out, and Tyrrell's voice was ringing in his ears.

"I have found my snake, and thus I kill it!"

There was but one report of Nat Tyrrell's pistol. No second shot was needed. He had made sure of his snake. His bullet had passed through the heart of Mark Wedderburn, who fell backward on the ground, and was dead before he could be touched.

There had been no interference.

For one reason, the crisis of the affair had been quickly reached, and the developments had been so startling as to astound all present.

For another reason, Abijah Duncome and Zachary Byrd, as well as the miners, had no doubt that Nat Tyrrell was abundantly able to take his own part, and Charley Wedderburn believed his uncle to be an omnipotent person, whom no one would dare to touch.

As soon as he had fired the fatal shot, Tyrrell sunk down and knelt by the side of his sister.

Charley Wedderburn, recovering from his stupor like one who awakes from a dream, was the first to speak.

"Shoot him down!" he shouted. "Shoot the assassin down! He has murdered my uncle!"

Tyrrell looked up but once, and only for an instant; but that glance was sufficient.

"I have killed a mad-dog," he answered. "If his puppy of a nephew dares to question the deed, let him come and do so."

He bent his face toward his sister's, and felt her heart.

"She lives, thank God!" he muttered. "Now that the snake is dead, the wound may have a chance to heal."

"Will none of you seize that murderer?" demanded Charley Wedderburn.

"I won't," sturdily replied Vermont.

"Nor I," responded Jim Allen, and most of the miners.

Rose Tyrrell was slowly recovering consciousness, and her brother rose from the ground, holding her in his arms, and supporting her when she was on her feet.

"I am going," he said, "to take this poor, broken flower to a place of safety. If any man thinks he ought to stop me, or believes that he is able to do it, let him put his belief to the test."

"Any man who reaches him must pass over me," said Vermont, as he stepped to the side of his late chief.

"And me!" responded Jim Allen.

"And all of us!" shouted the miners together.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AFTER THE TRAGEDY.

ABIJAH DUNCOME followed Nat Tyrrell when he left the mine.

With a delicacy and a tenderness that would hardly have been expected of such a man, he did not say a word, but quietly took an arm of the weak and shattered woman, and assisted Tyrrell to support her, and Tyrrell accepted his aid in silence.

Before they reached Last Chance camp they were met by Miss Duncome and Sally Mapes.

Cessie was curious to know who the woman was that they had found; but her quick sense enabled her to perceive that something serious had occurred, and for once her eyes asked more questions than her tongue.

Mr. Duncome did not answer either at once, but waited for Tyrrell to speak.

Tyrrell was engaged in watching Sally Mapes, whose face wore an eager and startled look as she stared at the pale face and almost motionless form of silent Rose Tyrrell.

Never since she came to that region had Sally Mapes been so powerfully and visibly moved. She fairly trembled, and her lips quivered, and tears came into her dark eyes. Miss Duncome gazed at her in wonder.

At last she spoke, but in a hesitating way, as she put out her hand toward Rose.

"Is it—is it—"

"It is," answered the deep voice of Nat Tyrrell. "It is my sister. It is Rose. It is the girl you know of. I have found the man who wronged her. His name was Mark Wedderburn. He is dead now."

"Mark Wedderburn dead?" exclaimed Cessie.

Sally Mapes did not seem to notice that part of Tyrrell's brief statement. She only knew that she saw before her the girl who had nursed her and cared for her and brought her from death to life, and that the girl needed her sympathy and help.

She folded Rose in her arms, and soothed her as a mother would soothe a child, while her tears fell like rain, and as Rose looked up at her there was something like a smile on her wan face.

After awhile Sally was sufficiently composed to listen to the story of the tragedy as Mr. Duncome told it to her and his daughter.

It was only a brief account of Mark Wedderburn's discharge of Tyrrell, the arrival of Rose, and the result that so quickly followed her arrival.

As for Rose's story, that was known to both his listeners, and neither of them had a word of regret for the death of Mark Wedderburn, or of blame for the man who killed him.

"Served him right, the black-hearted scoundrel!" exclaimed Sally, and there was nobody to find fault with her for saying so.

"Before I leave here I will put her in a place

of safety where she will be well cared for," said Tyrrell, "but I hardly know what to do, in such a place as this."

"She will go with me," at once answered Sally Mapes.

"Let me take care of her," suggested Cessie.

"No!" replied Sally. "Who should she go with but me? She cared for me when I was sick, and poor and helpless, and now it is my turn to care for her, and I will be so glad to do it. The Lord has sent her to me, and she must be mine. None of you owe her what I owe her, or can love her as I love her, and with me she will be as safe as a babe in its cradle. And she won't go with anybody else—will you, my poor, dear child?"

Rose's clinging embrace was a sufficient answer, though the poor waif did not move her thin lips, and there was scarcely a sign of expression in her wandering eyes.

"I am afraid that Mr. Byrd may object," suggested Nat Tyrrell.

"Then he must object to me," replied Sally.

"You know, Mr. Tyrrell, that Alice will love her, and that she won't allow this dear child to be anywhere else, and how could Zach Byrd stand against the two of us? He won't want to, either. He ain't so hard a man as he sometimes seems to be."

"I think that will be for the best, friend Tyrrell," said Mr. Duncome. "Miss Mapes is a remarkably sensible female, as well as a very good woman, and she is fully to be trusted. Your sister shall not want for anything. You have my word for that."

Tyrrell made Rose drink a little from his liquor-flask, and pressed a kiss upon her pale brow.

"Farewell!" he said. "Farewell, my poor, broken flower! If you have ever sinned, your suffering has counted more than the sin. The snake has been killed, and now the poisoned wound may have a chance to heal. Good-by, Miss Mapes and Miss Duncome. It may be a long time before I see you again."

"You won't come to the house, then?" said Sally.

"No. I said farewell to Alice, and nothing has happened to make me break my word."

Rose Tyrrell was led away by Sally Mapes and Miss Duncome, and only once did she look back at her brother with a wondering stare, as if there was something connected with him which she partly comprehended.

Mr. Duncome and Tyrrell walked on to the camp.

"I will stay here the rest of the day, Mr. Duncome," said Nat, "so that I can be found if anybody wants me."

There was somebody who wanted him, and who wanted him very badly.

The somebody was naturally Charley Wedderburn.

It was not to be expected that the young gentleman who had witnessed the sudden death of his uncle, would be willing to sit down quietly and suffer the slayer to go unpunished. In his eyes the killing was murder, as it must have been according to the strict letter of the law where the law was coldly administered, and there was enough to induce him to go as far as he could in the line of what he doubtless believed to be justice.

His uncle, a man of wealth and position, had been the victim of a poor adventurer, whose previous life and reputation showed him to be a desperate character, and against whom Charley Wedderburn believed himself to have a just cause of personal complaint. There was something strange in the appearance of the woman on the scene; but Charley was sure that an unprejudiced jury would decide the cause of the shooting to have been Tyrrell's anger at his dismissal from the position of superintendent of the mine.

Therefore, he determined to lose no time in turning Nat Tyrrell over to the law, and proceeded to take steps for that purpose as soon as his uncle's remains had been conveyed to the camp.

As there was no legal authority inside of a range of fifty miles, it was of course useless to attempt anything like a regular arrest, and there was another drawback in the fact, which the young man could not help noticing, that the miners strongly sympathized with Tyrrell.

But Mr. Claudius Doster, one of the directors of the company, and Mark Wedderburn's principal friend and backer, happened to be at the camp just then, and he immediately took Charley's side, promising him all the assistance in his power.

There was a number of employees about the office, and of those connected with the building of the smelting-works, upon whom they could rely, and they were quietly brought together and instructed as to what they would have to do.

Besides these there were several rough hands who had been discharged from the Hard Times works, and were consequently ready for anything that might turn up. A promise of employment in the Last Chance Mine secured them, and they were joined with the others, under the command of Claudius Doster and Charley Wedderburn.

"Now we are all right," said the young man, "and we will be sure to get him if he hasn't run away."

He had not run away. Nothing was further from Nat Tyrrell's mind than the idea of running away from anything.

When he had parted from Abijah Duncome he went to his lodgings, a single room in a small shanty which he had fitted up for his occupation.

He was packing his few belongings, with the view of putting them in safe keeping, when the door of the shanty opened and he was suddenly confronted by more than a dozen armed men, who poured in and made quite a formidable appearance in the room.

When he perceived that this force was headed by Doster and Charley Wedderburn, its purpose was plain enough to him.

"What do you want here?" he quietly asked.

"You are our prisoner," replied Claudius Doster.

"How so? Have you a warrant for my arrest, or anything of that kind?"

"We have the warrant of justice, which authorizes all law-abiding people to arrest a murderer wherever he may be found."

"I am no murderer, Mr. Doster. I have merely executed a law of nature that is binding upon all honest men—I have killed a snake."

"You have killed a man, and you must pay the penalty of your crime. We find you getting ready to run away."

"If you knew me better, sir, you would say that I am not the kind of man who runs away."

"We will see that you don't do it. Take him, boys!"

Nat Tyrrell drew himself up and faced them.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "I don't blame you, Charley Wedderburn. I can excuse you for getting excited and seeking to do something foolish; but I warn the rest of you that you had better be careful how you meddle with what don't concern you. If anybody wants to place me fairly on trial, I can always be found for that purpose; but I don't intend to put myself in the hands of my enemies, who have no right to touch me. Stand aside, there, and let me pass!"

"Close up, men!" ordered Doster.

They closed up solidly enough, but shrunk back a little as Nat Tyrrell took a step toward them.

He carried two revolvers in his belt, but his hands were empty as he advanced upon them, and they naturally wondered what he expected to do.

"Seize him!" ordered Doster.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he was himself seized by Tyrrell, who caught him quickly by the collar with both hands, swung him around upon his back, and burst through the throng.

He had gained the door before they could recover from their surprise.

"Shoot him down!" shouted Charley Wedderburn.

"Don't shoot!" cried Claudius Doster, who at once became aware of the fact that he was being made to serve as a shield for Tyrrell's exit.

Under the circumstances the men in the room did not dare to fire a shot; but they pressed forward to rescue Doster, and followed his captor into the street, where they found themselves, to their consternation, in the midst of a crowd of the men of Last Chance Mine.

Their presence at that place and time could be easily accounted for.

They had considered it their duty to look after Nat Tyrrell, and such a crowd as that which had entered his shanty could not pass without notice in Last Chance Camp.

There they were, and they were quick enough to guess what was the matter.

Weapons were hastily drawn, and threatening words and gestures gave promise of wild work, when Nat Tyrrell calmed the angry passions of the rival crowds.

"There is no trouble here," he said, as he released his captive. "These men thought they could arrest me without a warrant; but they have discovered their mistake, and are willing to go home and behave themselves."

"They had better do it right quick," remarked Vermont. "If they make such another mistake some of them will run a big chance of gettin' hurt bad."

Charley Wedderburn's posse dispersed, and there was an end of that attempt upon Nat Tyrrell's liberty.

The next morning he was gone.

He had left Last Chance camp quietly and alone, and no person knew how he went or what direction he had taken.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON NAT TYRELL'S TRAIL.

One result of the tragedy at Last Chance Mine was another strike by the miners, and they were solid as a rock this time.

They determined, without a dissenting voice, that they would not accept Charley Wedderburn as superintendent of the mine, and that they would not

do a stroke of work until a superintendent to suit them should be appointed.

The new strike put a bad face on affairs just at that time, as it was highly important to the shareholders and all concerned that the new vein should be tested, and its value proved, as soon as possible.

Charley Wedderburn's obstinate disposition would have inclined him to oppose the strikers, and hold out against them to the last extremity; but he found himself powerless in the matter.

Although unquestionably the heir of Mark Wedderburn, he could not come into possession of his uncle's property until it was transferred to him by due process of law. In the meanwhile Abijah Duncome, who had an acute perception of the interests of the shareholders, and of himself as one of them, procured the appointment as temporary superintendent of Sam Casey, otherwise Vermont, who had been chosen by Nat Tyrrell to lead the gang on the morning of the tragedy.

So the new vein was opened and developed, and the results were highly satisfactory to all concerned.

Although Charley Wedderburn openly objected to this arrangement, he was secretly gratified by the prospect of a large increase of his wealth.

He knew that he must soon come into the enjoyment of his uncle's estate, and he determined to employ a portion of his riches so that it would produce satisfaction for himself and disappointment for others. He intended to get the Tyrrell obstacle out of the way, and to marry Alice Byrd. To this end his obstinacy would have impelled him, even if he had not supposed himself to be in love with her.

In one particular his plans were thwarted by Abijah Duncome.

The capitalist from Massachusetts was chided by his daughter for his delay in the settlement of Mark Wedderburn's claim against Zachary Byrd.

The young lady clearly saw, as Nat Tyrrell had seen, that if the claim should come into Charley's hands he would be more eager than his uncle had been to press it so as to serve his purpose.

But Mr. Duncome, as a matter of fact, attended to the business as speedily and thoroughly as possible.

He journeyed to the distant county seat as soon as a responsible person was appointed to settle Mark Wedderburn's estate, tendered the amount of Zachary Byrd's indebtedness, and demanded the stock that had been given to secure it. He received the stock, and turned it over to the old man, taking his note for the sum he had advanced.

Charley Wedderburn, who believed that he understood the object of this proceeding and who doubtless did understand it, noted it as another of the grudges (one of them inherited from his uncle) which he bore against Abijah Duncome.

At the same time he determined that he would not be balked by anybody, and proceeded to put in execution a plan which, if successful, would effectually prevent Nat Tyrrell from returning to the neighborhood of Last Chance camp.

This plan involved a conference with Rube Hatcher, and the payment of a considerable sum of money to that individual.

"Do you really believe, Rube Hatcher, that you can find that man Tyrrell?" asked Charley.

"I hain't a doubt of it," replied Rube. "If any man living can find him, I'm the man."

"I believe you are likely to, as you have good cause to hunt him down. He murdered your brother, and now he has murdered my uncle. Of course you understand that all I want in the matter is to see justice done. The man ought to hang for his last crime, which can be easily proved, and I want him caught and turned over to the authorities at a place where he won't have such a gang to stand up for him as he would be likely to have here."

"I understand that well enough, sir; but you know that Nat Tyrrell is a hard customer to ketch. If he shows fight, I may have to shoot him down."

"Criminals take those chances. If you have to, you must."

"You want me to take him, then, Mr. Wedderburn, dead or alive?"

"Yes. My duty to my uncle and to the law compels me to say that he must be taken, dead or alive."

"This is a soft snap, Violet," remarked Hatcher to his unwilling confederate after the conference was over. "To get pay for what a feller would be glad to do for nothin' is just too lovely."

"I don't see any sort of a soft snap in foolin' with Nat Tyrrell," moodily replied Violet. "I've had too much o' that a'ready."

"But there's big money in this, my lad, and you'll get your share. It's dead or alive, remember, and it's a durned sight easier to take him dead than alive. I've a notion, too, that the young chap would rather have him dead than alive. I would, if I was in his place, seein' that Nat Tyrrell ain't likely to hang for killin' that old man."

As Charley Wedderburn must have known when he employed Rube Hatcher, he had put a genuine bloodhound on Tyrrell's trail.

Nobody knew what course Montana Nat had taken, or what point or purpose he had in view; but Hatcher was able, from items he had picked up here and there, and especially from the interview which he had witnessed between Tyrrell and Alice Byrd and her father, to form a pretty fair idea of his intentions, and his judgment was that his man had gone prospecting, in the hope of making a rich find.

Of course, he knew that he might as well attempt to find a needle in a haystack as to look for a loose prospector in that region; but all things are possible to a man actuated by so bitter a hate and so deadly an object as sent Rube Hatcher in pursuit of his foe.

Even a prospector cannot wander a long time in the mountains and forests without stopping somewhere to replenish his supplies of food and ammunition, and thus it was that Rube Hatcher got on the track of Tyrrell at Hard Times, at which outpost of civilization Nat had called for necessities.

After suppressing an attempt at mutiny on the part of Violet, which he punished pretty severely, the commander of the expedition took up the line of march again, and struck off into the wilderness in search of the man he had sworn to kill.

He had a weary and almost hopeless quest until he at last struck what had recently been a little camp,

as was plainly indicated by the ashes of a small fire.

Here he found the torn fragments of a letter and a rain-washed envelope directed to Nat Tyrrell at Last Chance camp.

"Now we've struck the trail, Violet!" he joyfully exclaimed. "I have almost as good as got him now, and the money of that chap at Last Chance is almost as good as in your pocket, my boy."

"I wish it was thar, and that I was out of this scrape," muttered Violet.

There had been two men in the camp, as was shown by their own tracks and those of their horses, and when the searchers had followed the trail a little distance it became evident that the two men had separated, as rival prospectors might naturally do.

It became a question then which trail they should take, and on this point there was absolutely no evidence to determine their action.

"Cuss the luck!" angrily exclaimed the human bloodhound. "I am as sure that one of those men was Montana Nat as I am that I stand here; but which one of them was it, and did he go this way or that way? If there had been only one of them at that camp, I would have had him dead sure; but that other infernal nuisance had to turn up and mix the matter. Which trail ought we to take? Hain't you got an idea to advance, Violet?"

"Not so much as the ghost of an idea. 'Pears like it ain't none o' my mix, nohow."

"Durned if I don't think I had better make it your mix, by killing you right here, and turning you in for the man I'm hunting. But I've got to find him, anyway, for my own satisfaction. I must trust to luck, I reckon, and here goes for heads or tails."

Rube tossed up a gold piece, and the result decided him to take the trail that led to the left, so he followed it closely, with Violet at his heels.

Just before dark, while the trail was yet fresh and easy to follow, they came upon a horse tethered to a bush. There was a pair of saddle-bags on his back, and part of a prospector's outfit was on the ground near by.

"Lie low now, Violet, and follow me softly," ordered Rube. "The cuss is sure to be nigh at hand."

They were then in a very rough region, and Hatcher silently crept forward, looking cautiously in all directions, until he came in sight of the men whose trail had led him thither.

He was standing at the edge of the ravine, his hands behind his back, looking either down into or across the chasm, as if considering the chances of finding gold-bearing rock in that locality.

His back was turned to his persistent enemy; but he was tall and dark-haired, and Rube Hatcher, who ought to know Nat Tyrrell, was sure that the man he sought stood before him and within easy range of his rifle.

"Keep as still as a mouse, Violet," he whispered. "I've got him foul now, and the safest thing will be to draw a bead on him from right here."

"Air you sartin it's Nat Tyrrell?" asked Violet.

"Of course I am, you fool. Do you think I've hunted him so long, and don't know him when I see him?"

"All right, old man; you're the big know-it-all, you are. 'Tain't none o' my mix."

Rube Hatcher, who was concealed behind a rock, rested his rifle on its edge, took a careful aim, and fired.

The man at the edge of the ravine threw out his hands, as if by galvanic action, and disappeared without a cry.

"At last I've kept my word and made an end of him," muttered Rube, as he rose to his feet, drew a long breath of relief, and put a fresh cartridge in his rifle by way of precaution.

He walked on to the ravine, and cautiously peered down into the chasm; but no sound came up from its depths, and nothing was to be seen there, and the darkness of night was closing in upon the scene of the murder.

"It'll be too durned dark to git down thar tonight," remarked Violet.

"And what would we want to go down there for, you fool?" demanded Rube.

"Jest to see ef it's really Nat Tyrrell that you killed."

"Of course it was Nat Tyrrell. But we will go down there in the morning and get his ears, and I hope that will satisfy you."

It was no easy matter to get down into that ravine in the daytime, and Rube Hatcher and his follower had a tough scramble before they reached the bottom.

There they scared away a buzzard from the mangled corpse of a man, which they hastened to examine.

It was already shockingly disfigured, but a glance told them that it was not the body of Nat Tyrrell.

"I kinder had a notion that it wasn't Montana Nat," remarked Violet.

"Why didn't you tell me so, you durned scalawag?" demanded Rube.

"'Pears like I did; but you was sartin, and I allus give in to you."

"It is a bad piece of business; but this is a good enough Nat Tyrrell until we get our money, and we will go to Hard Times and report that we found him here."

Hatcher did not fail to search the pockets of his victim, and took the further precaution of burying the saddle-bags and turning the horse loose.

"All the same I've got to go for Montana Nat again," he muttered, as he turned back toward Hard Times.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ONE DEAD, AND ANOTHER LOST.

ZACHARY BYRD was not a little surprised, when he returned home after the death of Mark Wedderburn, to find Jack Tyrrell's sister installed as an inmate of his house. It is not too much to say that he was displeased.

The poor girl of course was an object of compassion; but she had caused the death of Mark Wedderburn, and she was Nat Tyrrell's sister.

He would not have said that Wedderburn's death had grieved him severely; but he was afraid that he was likely to lose by it, rather than to gain, and he was certain that he objected to Nat Tyrrell, on general principles and for particular reasons.

Tyrrell had come between him and his pet pro-

ject, and had made trouble for him when all was going on swimmingly and well. He was by no means a fit husband for Alice, in character or position, and he had only upset her uselessly. He had gone away according to his promise, to be sure; but he expected to return, and was still to be guarded against.

The old man had not abandoned the hope of marrying Alice to Charley Wedderburn, and was not at all desirous of having about his house any person who would remind her of her absent lover. He had asked for time; but what he wanted was time to reconcile her to her lot, and see her safely the bride of a rich husband.

But, if he was displeased, or even offended, he found it advisable to conceal his feelings as well as he could. For both Sally Mapes and Alice were against him.

Sally stoutly declared her intention of sticking to Rose Tyrrell through thick and thin.

"She stuck to me," said that determined woman, "and she nursed me and took care of me when thar wasn't anybody else to do it, and when I was nigh to death's door. Now she is sick and helpless in body and mind, and I've got her, and I mean to keep her. If she ain't welcome here, Zach Byrd, I'll find a place where I can make her welcome."

The old man could only say that Rose Tyrrell was quite welcome to stay, as it was clear that if she was sent away Sally would go with her, and he could not afford to lose Sally.

Just then, especially, he could not afford to lose Sally, for Alice was taken ill the day after the death of Mark Wedderburn, and for some time she was in quite a critical condition.

Last Chance camp could boast of no skilled physicians, and what would have become of Alice if she had been deprived of such a capital nurse as Sally?

Of course Sally would not have left her; but Sally was in a position to demand favors, if she wanted them.

As for Alice she "settled on" Rose Tyrrell at once, and in her delicate state of health nothing could be denied her. She seemed to see in the desolate girl something that Nat Tyrrell had left, and she loved his sister as if Rose had been a part of himself.

Rose was a mystery to those in the cabin, and it was some time before they could comprehend her. If she was a lunatic, she was an entirely harmless one, and was to be pitied rather than feared.

At first she seemed to be dazed. She had no recollection of the tragedy at Last Chance Mine, and stared in a wondering way when it was mentioned. The name of Mark Wedderburn or of Marshall Waters awoke no memories for her, and the past appeared to be indeed a dead past.

She clung to Sally Mapes as to a protector; but her affection, which had long lacked an outlet or an object, was lavished upon Alice abundantly. The two grew together so closely that Zachary Byrd would not have dared to separate them.

Indeed, it was not long before his hospitality to Rose took a better form than that of mere toleration, as he was in a better humor with himself and consequently with others.

He was much better satisfied with his worldly position after Abijah Duncome had paid his debt to Mark Wedderburn. True, he still owed the money, but to an easy creditor, and he would have plenty of time to pay it, and his stock was sure to increase in value, and in the mean time he would not be under the thumb of Charley Wedderburn.

Not that he was on bad terms with that young man, or had even grown cool toward him. By no means. He still hoped to secure him as Alice's husband, and encouraged Charley in looking forward to that consummation.

But it was a good thing to feel independent; to know that he could not be dictated to, and to be able to take his own time to persuade Alice to look at the affair in the right light.

It must have been to him a relief as great as it was unexpected when the news of Nat Tyrrell's death reached Last Chance camp.

At first it was a mere rumor; but it soon took shape, and was finally quite confirmed.

He had been found by two prospectors, lying dead in a distant valley, with a bullet hole in his head, and they had buried him where they found him.

No effects of his had been brought away to tell the tale; but it had been circumstantially related by the prospectors, whose story was repeated to Last Chance at second hand from Hard Times, and they had fully recognized him.

It was Zachary Byrd's duty to break this news to Alice; but he delegated it to Sally Mapes, who was to tell the story when a suitable opportunity arose.

The opportunity was soon found, as Alice was getting well and strong, and as she wondered at the pitying glances that were bestowed on her now and then.

Sally answered a wondering question by telling her that there was bad news about Mr. Tyrrell.

Alice jumped to the right conclusion at once, prompted by her fears, rather than by her judgment.

"Is he dead?" she demanded, in a strained voice and with white lips.

"That's what they say, dearie," answered Sally.

"I don't know for certain that it's so, but the story comes mighty straight," and she proceeded to tell the tale as she had received it from Zachary Byrd.

"I—don't—believe it," rejoined Alice, as her face set in a hard and fixed expression.

She continued to declare that she did not believe it; but everybody else believed it, and how could she help the belief being borne in upon her.

As time wore on, and the story of Tyrrell's death was not contradicted, but the belief in its truth became strong and settled, her father renewed his advice and entreaties for her marriage to Charley Wedderburn.

It was in all respects an excellent match for her. He could not say as yet what the amount of Charley's wealth would be; but he was sure to be rich, and he was a good-looking, good-hearted, substantial young man, who loved her truly and would be a good husband to her. It was positively wrong in Alice to oppose what was the dearest wish of her father's life, especially since the man whom she fancied she loved had passed away from the world.

All this and much more the old man urged, and

Alice listened, at first with tears and protests, and then silently and passively.

By this time she had fallen into a listless and nerveless condition—a sort of death in life—and hardly seemed to belong to the world in which she still lived and moved. Even Sally Mapes advised her to consent, and it was easier to yield than to stand out.

So at last, as if nothing mattered to her any more, and as if she had ceased to expect any happiness in this life, she consented to marry Charley Wedderburn, and the day for the marriage was fixed.

Rose Tyrrell had changed considerably since she came to Zachary Byrd's cabin.

At first the weakness of her mind had failed with the weakness of her body, both worn out and broken down by strain and exhaustion. But, as her body gained health and strength, her mind became stronger and clearer.

There were times when she seemed to be in possession of her senses as fully as anybody. There were times, again, when her reason seemed to desert her, and her face took on the dazed look which it had worn after the tragedy at the mouth of the mine. But she showed no disposition to wander, and it was no longer considered necessary to keep any sort of a watch upon her.

Yet she seemed to retain no remembrance of her former troubles, and some time elapsed before she was even affected by the mention of her brother's name. Occasionally, when Nat Tyrrell was spoken of at the house, and Zachary Byrd frowned, as he usually did, there came a pained look into her face; but she gave no other evidence of interest in him.

When the news of his death arrived, and was a subject of conversation among those with whom she was associated, she was still unaffected, except by Alice's grief, with which she sympathized most sincerely.

When Alice again and again declared that Nat Tyrrell was not dead, Rose assented to that opinion, and added a few words of her own.

"He is not dead," said she. "They can never kill him."

But Rose had an unbalanced brain, and was not the sort of standby that Alice needed at that time.

One evening, when she seemed to be much stronger in body and mind than she had yet been, she took a water pail, and went to the spring for water, as she had often done.

"He is not dead," she whispered to Alice as she left the cabin.

It seemed strange to Alice at the moment that Rose should whisper that assurance to her just then; but she thought no more of it, and patiently awaited her return with the water.

Rose did not return with the water.

When they had waited for her until they became alarmed, Sally Mapes went down to the spring, where she found the pail, but no Rose.

Search was made for her as soon as possible, and the hills were scoured far and near; but no trace of her was found.

She had doubtless wandered away, but had disappeared as swiftly and utterly as when she had first been seen near Zachary Byrd's cabin.

After this disaster Alice fell ill again, and the wedding was necessarily postponed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TEN STRIKE.

FAR from Last Chance camp, and in the midst of hills that were higher and woods that were wilder than those about that sparsely-settled locality, a woman was walking alone.

The sun had nearly reached its meridian height, and the rays that struggled through the masses of foliage overhead threw strange lights and shadows upon her pale face and into her dark eyes.

She was not such as she had been when John Randolph mistook her for a ghost, nor such as she had been when she left Zachary Byrd's cabin to go to the spring.

She was neatly dressed—Cessie Duncome and Sally Mapes had attended to her wardrobe—but her garments had been torn by rough travel, and her hair was disordered.

Although she was very pale, and evidently exhausted in body and mind, her eyes were not wild, nor did her appearance indicate insanity.

She had merely a sad and pensive look as she slowly wandered there, with her hands clasped before her, and her gaze mostly on the ground.

At last she paused before a rock that rose above the ground about as high as her knees, partly covered with earth and moss, and she looked at it intently for awhile.

Then she sank down beside it, and began to tear away the earth and moss with her fingers.

As she worked, making but faint progress toward reaching the center of the earth, the wild look came back into her eyes, and tears fell down her cheeks as she looked at her hands.

"I cannot do it," she murmured. "It is too hard. It tears my hands, and makes them bleed. But it is so pretty, pretty, pretty! If I could only dig a grave here, I would be glad to lay down in it and die. But I cannot dig it."

She rose to her feet, brushed the dirt from her hands, and looked around sadly.

"There is a grave for me somewhere," she said—"there must be—if I could find it. I know it is warm and quiet down there, and I am so cold and tired. If I could get down there I would rest, and nobody would find me, and I should nevermore make any trouble for anybody. But I must find a grave already made; for I could never dig it with these poor fingers, and I have nothing else to work with."

As she stood there, holding this sad discourse with herself, a man came silently through the forest, and paused to look at her.

A tall and stalwart man, with dark hair and eyes, whose form and manner and gait bespoke him every inch a man.

It was Nat Tyrrell, and nobody would have been likely to mistake him for a dead man.

He carried a knapsack on his back, to which were strapped a pan and a pick. A canteen hung at his side, and a hammer was visible in his belt; but the rifle that he bore on his shoulder showed that he was prepared for war as well as for peace.

He quietly walked around, in the concealment of the trees, to get a better view of the woman who was there alone in the wilderness.

He saw her face, and recognized her at once.

"Rose!" he exclaimed, as he quickly stepped toward her. "Rose! my poor sister! What does this mean? How did you come here?"

She held out her hands, and a glad look came into her face—not of surprise or of sudden recognition, but just as if they were boy and girl again, brother and sister, back in the old days, before he had gone from her.

"I am so tired, brother, and so cold," she said.

"Poor child!" and he took her in his arms, unslung his canteen, and put it to her lips.

"Take a drop of this, Rose—only a taste. It will warm you and give you strength."

She motioned it away with a gesture of disgust.

"No—I hate it. He used to drink it, and tried to force it upon me. Take it away. It brings up bad and bitter thoughts."

She seemed to be quite sensible, and Nat sought to draw from her the story of her travel.

"Why did you come here, my poor sister?" he asked. "How did you get here, alone and unprotected?"

"I am looking for my grave. I have not found it yet, but have found such a pretty place, where I would dig it if I could. But I cannot dig into the hard, white, shining stones with my poor fingers."

"This is terrible," muttered Nat.

He led her to a seat on the soft moss under a tree, and sat down at her side.

It was clear to him that her mind was gone again. Though the snake had been killed, the wound had not healed.

"Won't you help me dig it, brother?" she asked.

"Yes, dear child. Of course I will help you."

She noticed his sad and pained look, and answered it.

"Are you thinking about my head, brother? Do not let that trouble you. I know it is not right now;

but sometimes it is, or nearly so. There is a weakness that comes and goes, and at times I do not know what I am doing or saying; but they tell me that I am improving. I remember that a shot was fired, and I seemed to awake out of a dreadful dream, and something broke away in my head, and an iron hand that clutched my heart loosed its grip.

I know that I rested after that, and there was peace and quiet and ease. I saw things as others saw them, and felt as they felt, and my thoughts were not so very different from theirs. But it is not always so. Sometimes I lose myself in dreams, and sail out upon an endless sea. I do not know how I ever return to the shore, but suppose that the good God has mercy upon me and brings me back."

Again she seemed to be quite sensible, and Nat was rejoiced.

"You are all right now, are you not, dear child?"

"I suppose so. I hope so. I am sure to be much better when I am with you."

"Then I will never leave you again."

"What was I doing or saying, brother, when you found me here?"

"You were staring about as if you were dazed, though you knew me as soon as I spoke to you. You said that you were looking for your grave, but could not dig into the hard, white stone."

"I must have dreamed of that. Yes, I remember the dream. I dug at the rock with my hands, and threw away the moss and earth, and laid bare the yellow-white stone, all full of shining veins."

She hastily arose and gazed about, a little bewildered at first, but then with a pleased and eager look.

"Why, brother, it was no dream!" she exclaimed.

"It was real. This is the place, and there is the very rock at which I was digging. Look at the moss and earth that I scattered. Come and see the stone, brother."

She led him to the spot, and he gazed smilingly at the scene of her futile labor.

Suddenly his face changed. His eyes grew bright, and his face was full of animation.

The next moment he was on his knees at the rock, scratching away the earth as she had done, and laying bare the face of the stone, which, as she had said, was yellowish-white and seamed with shining particles.

She laughed at him, and accused him of being as great a goose as she had been.

"What have we here, Rose?" he exclaimed.

"What sort of rock is this that you have found?

If it isn't gold-bearing quartz, I am a blockhead."

He drew the hammer from his belt, and broke off a spur of the rock, which he examined intently.

Then he jumped up.

"Look at this!" he almost shouted, as he held the shining stone before her eyes. "This is a find, Rose!

You have struck it rich! Surely a good Providence brought you here. It can be nothing less than a first-class fissure vein that shows such an outcrop.

You have hit upon the biggest thing I ever saw, and I might have searched all over these hills without finding it. Dear girl, you have made our fortunes."

His bright look brought the smile to Rose's face, and she was happy because she saw that he was glad, though she did not fairly understand the reason of his joy.

"I am not sure that I quite know what you mean," she said; "but I will be very happy if I have made your fortune."

"I tell you, Rose, both our fortunes are here in this rock. It is as sure as that we are both alive. I will stake off the claim at once. But no; there is no such hurry as that. My poor child, I had forgotten that you must be famishing. Come with me to where I left my horse, and you shall soon have some food to strengthen you. No; I will bring the horse here, and you must sit down and rest until I come back. I am so crazy over that find that I don't know what I am doing."

Rose seemed at the moment to be the sanest of the two. She waited quietly until Nat returned with his horse, when he made a fire and cooked some of the provisions that the horse carried, rejecting her profers of assistance.

The meal was by no means a dainty one; but it satisfied hunger, and Rose was greatly refreshed and invigorated.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"THEY CAN'T KILL HIM!"

AFTER dinner Nat Tyrrell lighted his pipe, and settled himself for a talk with Rose, choosing a position

where he could keep an eye on that great discovery, the quartz rock.

Rose appeared to him at that time to be so clear in her mind, so unexcited and reasonably well balanced, that he might hope to obtain from her an account of the cause and manner of her wandering, and perhaps news of Alice Byrd and the Last Chance people generally.

"Now, Rose," he said, "I am very anxious to know what it was that brought you to this spot, why you left Last Chance camp, and how you got here. I wish you would try to tell me."

"Perhaps I can," she answered, "if you will give me time and let me get at it in my own way. Things are tangled here in my head—dark and tangled—and I must be careful not to lose track of myself."

"I will try to be patient, sister, and you must not worry more than you can help."

"Let me see. You left me in care of that woman whom I nursed when I was a good and happy girl, and she was very kind to me. There was an old man, and he also was kind, though he frowned at me sometimes, and looked very black when your name was mentioned. There was a young man, too, who came there now and then, and I did not like him a bit, because I could see that he hated you, and he was not at all pleasant to me. And what then? Wedding bells and orange blossoms? No—that can't be. There are no churches in these hills, and no orange trees in these woods."

Nat nearly dropped his pipe in his excitement.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "Wedding-bells and orange blossoms? What is running in your head now, Rose? For mercy's sake try to tell me what you mean."

"You startled me, brother. You almost frightened me. Be patient, and I will get it straight presently. I must separate these things, and put each in its own place, because they join and tangle so easily. Now I see a point of light. Ah, yes!—that sweet girl, who was so tender and dear to me, and whose eyes brightened and whose cheeks glowed when anybody spoke of you."

"Alice," suggested Nat.

"Yes, it was Alice. She was very, very sick for a time; but she grew better and stronger after a while, though she was never bright and happy. It was for her that the young man came, and he spoke to her of marriage, and he and the old man often urged her, and she seemed to be always striving against them. When was that? Let me see. I hardly know when it was; but I know that they made her sad, and I tried to cheer her, and my head went wrong, and it is wrong now, and I am lost in a swamp, full of moss-covered trees and green water and slippery hummocks and lazy moccasin snakes. Oh, it is frightful!"

Her brother folded her in his arms and soothed her tenderly.

"Try to come out of it, dear sister, and tell me more."

"I will. I am out. When that spell left me I seemed to awake from a dream, and I heard them tell her that you were dead."

"Dead? That I was dead?"

"Yes—that you had been found dead in the woods far from there. Oh, it was all described to her very plainly, and how could she help believing it?"

"That was Charles Wedderburn's work, I am willing to swear," said Jack, and the dark look came into his face.

"I knew that you were not dead, brother, but did not dare to contradict them, and only whispered it to her. How could she believe me against them? When she did not know how I knew it? Then she sunk down and was helpless in their hands. She let them do with her as they pleased, and it was settled that they were to be married soon."

Nat Tyrrell sprung to his feet, thoroughly aroused.

"To be married?" he exclaimed. "Alice Byrd to be married! Are you sure that you are right about that, Rose?"

"Quite sure. It was settled that she was to be married, and something told me that I must go and seek you, and I went, and I found you, and you are not dead at all, and—and—that is all, brother."

"Were they willing to let you go?"

"I never asked them. I just went away and left them to wonder."

"When was this, Rose? How long has it taken you to come from Last Chance?"

"I believe the wind brought me here."

"You surely must have come quickly, or you would have starved on the way. We may be able to reach the camp in time, and we will start as soon as I have staked off my claim here."

This task was soon finished, and Nat put Rose on his horse, and set out toward Last Chance camp.

He was eager to get forward, and walked as fast as the horse could travel in that region, keeping up the pace until night compelled them to rest, and renewing the journey at an early hour in the morning.

Nothing of interest occurred until noon of the next day, when they halted for their midday meal near the edge of a deep ravine.

To this point they were followed by Rube Hatcher, who had struck their trail a short distance back, and who proposed to conceal himself near their temporary camp and await an opportunity to carry out his intention of taking Nat Tyrrell "dead or alive"—especially dead, as he was determined to make no sort of failure this time.</p

luck to try it. Reckon he's got horse-shoes hung all over him."

"Violet, you are a fool as well as a coward."

"Call me all the names you want to. Hard words don't break no bones. But I sha'n't meddle with Nat Tyrrell no more."

"I will settle with you some other time, my lad. I can do the job just as well alone. I am bound to make a sure shot from that bit of bush, and you won't come in for a cent of the money, mind you."

Violet slouched away, as if money was no object to him, but did not go far enough to get out of sight of his companion.

It was clearly impossible for Rube Hatcher to administer any punishment to the refractory youth just then; but he marked him as a soldier who had deserted in the face of the enemy, and whose case must be attended to as soon as circumstances would allow.

Having the "job" to attend to alone, he crept forward, along the edge of the ravine, and concealed himself in the "bit of bush" of which he had spoken as a safe position for a sure shot.

It was within fair sight and easy shooting distance of the spot which Tyrrell had chosen for a resting-place.

There he awaited a chance to strike a deadly blow at Montana Nat without endangering the life of his companion.

The chance came in a better shape than he had expected.

After Tyrrell had built a fire and cut some slices of bacon, he asked Rose to attend to broiling the meat while he went for fresh water to a spring which he had noticed near by.

As he went he was obliged to cross a piece of open ground, which brought him fairly within range of Rube Hatcher's rifle, though he was then further from the camp-fire than his enemy was.

Rube eagerly seized the chance, took careful aim and fired.

The shot would surely have been fatal, if Montana Nat at that instant had not stumbled.

Rose Tyrrell, as soon as her brother had left her, had her attention attracted to the "bit of bush," where she noticed a movement of the foliage for which she could not account, and she quietly walked toward it to investigate the matter.

She soon suspected that a man was concealed there, and went on until she was sure that this was the fact.

Rose was naturally fearless, and perhaps the disordered condition of her mind caused her to be unusually bold.

She did not fairly see the man, or gain an idea of his purpose there, until the shot was fired.

Then Rube Hatcher started up to note the outcome of his attempt, and both he and she saw Nat Tyrrell rising from the ground.

Rube was made aware of Rose Tyrrell's presence by her sudden rush toward the bush.

He hastily drew a pistol, and fired at her, forgetful of his "manners;" but she came like the wind, and, before he could resist her, she seized him by the shoulders, and pushed him over the edge of the ravine.

"They can't kill him!" she screamed, as the woul-be assassin went down into the depths.

As soon as Nat rose from the ground he looked in the direction from which the shot was fired, and he saw his sister's action, and heard her scream.

He ran to her at once, found her staggering at the edge of the abyss, and gently drew her back.

"What have you done, Rose?" he asked.

"He shot at you, brother," she faintly answered.

"Yes—I suppose it was my old enemy, Rube Hatcher; but he did not hit me."

"I pushed him over the cliff here, and he went down, down, down! He will never shoot at you again."

"My poor, brave sister!"

Nat noticed a stain of blood upon the sleeve of her dress, and tenderly raised her arm.

"Your arm is bleeding, Rose. He fired again, and the shot struck you."

"That is no matter, brother. I hardly felt it. It is only a scratch. Take my handkerchief and tie it up."

"Come away from this place, then."

He led her back to the camp-fire, where he tied up her wound, which proved to be scarcely more than a graze.

"I want to go away from here now," she said. "I must go at once. I cannot stay near the place where that man went over."

"Very well, Rose. We will eat our lunch as we go. We will soon strike the valley trail, and that will lead us direct to Last Chance camp."

CHAPTER XXIX.

PROSPERITY AND MATRIMONY.

LAST CHANCE MINE was prospering, and all connected with it were prospering.

Sam Casey, otherwise Vermont, proved to be an excellent superintendent.

Although he could not pretend to be a scientific miner, and laid no claim to consideration as a "mining expert," he was a good practical miner. He understood the work he had to do, and did it well and thoroughly, and was obeyed and respected by his mates, who were glad that they had at last succeeded in getting one of themselves as superintendent, although they grieved after Nat Tyrrell, and heartily deplored his sad fate as it had been reported to them.

Consequently the new vein had a fair chance, and its development was surprising even to the oldest miners. It might possibly prove not to be a true fissure vein; but there was no doubt that it was very rich at the start, and the prospects were highly promising.

Abijah Duncome was immensely pleased. He had made a fortunate investment, and was naturally glad of it. As Mark Wedderburn had suspected, it was through a hint of Nat Tyrrell's that the Eastern man had come into possession of such a valuable piece of property, and he would have been glad to do something good for Montana Nat; but Nat was dead, and he could only be grateful to his memory.

The stamp-mill was speedily finished with the money Mr. Duncome furnished, and the ore was ground and the metal collected, and the pan-out was

exceedingly satisfactory, and Last Chance stock went flying upward.

Charley Wedderburn had fully come into possession of his uncle's property, and was daily being made richer by the mine, in which he was still, as his uncle had been, the largest shareholder; but he made no objection to the arrangement that was working so well.

He did not submit to be ruled by Abijah Duncome—not a bit of it—but he knew on which side of his bread the butter was, and was content to let well enough alone.

Besides, he was occupied in arranging for his approaching marriage with Alice Byrd.

Zachary Byrd shared in the general prosperity; and began to speak to Mr. Duncome about paying his debt, but was told not to let that matter worry him, as he would soon be able to pay it and have his stock clear.

Mr. Duncome attributed his prosperity largely to the fact that he had been able to get his "nateral food," with which he had been amply supplied since Sally Mapes had taken the contract of furnishing him with baked beans and brown bread.

He could no longer go to Zachary Byrd's cabin for his provender, as the ill health of Alice and the care of Rose Tyrrell kept Sally's time occupied; but she was able to cook what he wanted, and it was regularly sent to him by John Randolph, who was useful for that purpose, at least.

Sally's occupation also deprived him of what he probably desired fully as much as the baked beans and brown bread—a chance to see her and talk to her.

It was not until Rose Tyrrell had disappeared, and Alice began to mend, that she began to walk out and take the air in the vicinity of the cabin.

As soon as Mr. Duncome learned that she had fallen into that habit, he began to take walks in the direction of Zachary Byrd's cabin, with the hope of meeting her, and at last he was successful.

He hastened to her when he saw her, holding out both his hands, his face glowing with pleasure.

"I am so glad to meet you at last, Miss Mapes," he said; "so glad to see you, and thank you for all your kindness and care."

Her cheeks were fairly radiant as she replied that she was very glad to meet him, too.

"I am all straightened out now," he went on to say, "thanks to you for providin' my nateral and wholesome food. I am healthy and prosperous, and it is all your doin'. As Theodore Parker used to say, Richard is himself again! No, it wasn't Theodore Parker who said that, but one of them theater fellers, I guess."

"You don't ought to go near them theater fellers, Mr. Duncome," prudishly replied Sally.

"I ain't a bit straight-laced, Miss Mapes, and I've learned a heap of sense from the play-actin' people. That Shakespeare, now, I should say, must have been raised on Yankee baked beans, and plenty of 'em, to get so much smartness into his noddle."

"I never come across him," remarked Sally.

"You ain't likely to, Miss Mapes. He's dead."

"Pore man! Did he leave a family?"

"There you've got me. Darned if I know much about the man. Celerity can give you all the facts, as she is mighty strong in facts. To come to the p'int, Miss Mapes, I have made a big strike by buying into Last Chance Mine just at the right time. The consarn is runnin' now as smooth and slick as ile, and we are gettin' out an amazin' quantity of the richest kind of rock. I mean to settle down right here, as I told you, and make another fortune; but I won't be worth a pinch of snuff for business unless I get my reg'lar baked beans, and you are the only woman in the country who's got a bean-pot."

"I'll give you the bean-pot, Mr. Duncome, if that's all you want."

"That ain't all I want. Not by a darned sight. What's the good of a bean-pot, unless you know how to use it? And supposin' I do get my bean-pot, where am I goin' to get my nice brown bread? When I heard that sensible remark from your lips, Miss Mapes, I said to myself, says I, there's the woman for me!"

"I'm afraid you're layin' it on a leetle too thick," modestly replied Sally.

"Not a bit of it. I want the woman who owns the bean-pot, and who is able and willin' to cook the beans and make the brown bread. The fact is, Miss Mapes, that I'm going to make you an offer, and I want to do it in style."

He glanced at the leaf-covered ground, and suddenly dropped on his knees before her.

"Gracious, mercy!" exclaimed Sally. "What is the matter, Mr. Duncome? Is it rheumatiz?"

"No, it ain't rheumatiz."

"Not a fit, I hope."

He clasped his hands in orthodox fashion, and began:

"My dear Miss Mapes! My dear Sally!—"

But Miss Duncome, who had a remarkable facility of dropping in and interrupting people at the right time, or the wrong time, and who had probably observed the scene as she approached, and had taken her own time for breaking in upon it, stepped forward just at that moment.

"Oh, pa!" she merrily exclaimed. "Ain't you ashamed of yourself? At your time of life! What are you doing there?"

Mr. Duncome did not seem to be at all abashed as he rose to his feet, though his face wore a solemn look. He brushed off his knees, and calmly replied:

"It is a matter of business, my dear. I was just going to make this lady an offer."

"An offer? Gracious goodness! Has it come to that already?"

"An offer of my heart and hand and half of my fortune, as I expect to settle the other half, my dear child, securely onto you."

"Well, pa, I am glad to see that you have that much judgment and Christian feeling left."

"My dear Celerity—"

"Bother that tiresome name! Do call me Cessie, pa, just for once, if you want me to forgive you for what you are doing now, or to look pleasantly on what you expect to do."

"My dear Cessie—"

"That is better, and you need not say another word. Of course I had seen this coming on, pa, and was prepared for it. So I was not going to faint and rumple my dress, or get angry and spoil my complexion. I do believe, pa, that you need somebody

to take care of you, as you are getting shaky, and that Miss Mapes is quite as capable of the task as any woman you can find in this horrid country. She is a dear, good creature, too, and I am quite fond of her. I hope she will marry you, though you do mean to get rid of half your property."

"I don't keer for his money," remarked Sally. "If he really wants to marry me, I will make him a good and true and loving wife."

"I havn't a doubt of it. But you must not expect me to regard you as a step-mother; for I could never endure the thought of a step-mother who came into the family in a pot of baked beans."

"Don't you worry me, young woman, and I won't worry you," sturdily replied Sally.

"Bless your soul!" exclaimed Miss Duncome, as she flew at Sally and kissed her. "I won't worry you the least bit in the world, unless it is by asking you to help me. And now I want to speak to both of you about business. I must say, pa, that you don't deserve any aid or sympathy from me, since you have not done for me what you ought to have done."

"What do you mean, my dear?"

"Didn't I tell you to pay the money that Mr. Byrd owed the Wedderburns, and to get his stock away from them?"

"And didn't I do that very thing?"

"Yes, but you gave Mr. Byrd the stock, and merely took his note, and that upset my plans, because it left you no hold upon him. When Alice flatly refused to marry Charley Wedderburn, he was awfully in the dumps, and I consoled him, like the good little woman that I am, and he was just on the point of asking for me like a good little man, when the news of Mr. Tyrrell's death came, and then Mr. Byrd began to bulldoze Alice, and now he has persuaded her to marry Charley Wedderburn, and it's all up with me."

Regardless of the possible damage to her complexion, Cessie began to cry, and Sally Mapes took her in her arms and soothed her.

"I hadn't the least idea that you was so sot on him," said her father.

"He is a nice young man," she sobbed, "presentable and manageable, and I wanted him. But I am not the only one to suffer. It is a great deal worse for Alice than it is for me. I can get along without him much better than she can get along with him. I don't see how you can have the heart, Miss Mapes, to let things go as they are going."

"I don't know but you are right about that," answered Sally. "Alice is gettin' all done down and don't take the least interest in anythin'. I do wish that Nat Tyrrell had lived and come back."

"Whether he lived or died, you have no right to let Alice marry a man who would make her miserable."

"That's a fact. It is real bad all around, and a downright shame, now I come to think of it. I don't know what I can do, but I'm goin' right off to give Zach Byrd a squar' talkin' to."

Sally started off with fire in her eyes and determination in her step.

CHAPTER XXX.

NAT TYRELL'S RETURN.

ABIJAH DUNCOME looked after Sally Mapes, smacking his lips as he had when he first tasted her baked beans.

"That is a good woman, Cessie," he said, "and a mighty sensible woman. She will straighten up the business if anybody can, though I don't see how she is likely to succeed as things are."

"It is a pity, pa, that you hadn't gone into it in a different way."

"What could I do, my child? I couldn't keep Nat Tyrrell from dyin'. He mixed up matters badly by goin' off and gettin' himself killed. Perhaps I ought not to have let him go."

"I will tell you, pa, what you might have done. You might have kept that stock, just as Mark Wedderburn did, and might have held it against Alice's father, and then you would have had him under your thumb, so that you could bulldoze him into doing the right thing."

"I am afraid, my dear, that I wasn't built up for a bulldozer."

"You lost your chance, anyhow. I declare, pa, here comes John Randolph, and he is actually runnin'. What can have stirred him up to such un-wanted activity?"

The darky was highly excited as he came running toward them, and appeared to have been badly frightened; but he cooled down considerably at the sight of his master and Miss Cessie.

"What's the matter, John?" demanded Mr. Duncome. "What in the name of human natur' has come across you now?"

"I done see'd dat ghost ag'in, sah."

"You consarned fool! You know it wasn't a ghost; but I'm afraid you will never get that idee through your thick head. It was a woman, and you know it was, as you saw her alive. Have you seen her again?"

"It was a ghost w'en I fust see'd it; but it may have changed to a woman. Dar ain't no 'countin' fur de ways ob dem ghosts an' ghostesses, nohow."

"Perhaps it is poor Rose Tyrrell," said Cessie. "She may have wandered back to the settlement, and if so, she must

"Hold on, Celerity!" shouted her father. "You're huggin' the wrong man."

"I don't care. Take Rose down, and let me get at her."

Tyrrell lifted Rose down from the horse, and she had her innning at the hugging match.

"And you, too, Rose, you poor, dear thing! I am so glad to see you both, that I could hug the breath out of you. Are you really alive, Mr. Tyrrell?"

"Decidedly so. But tell me—is she married?"

"Of course you mean Alice. She is not married yet, but soon to be. That is the way they have arranged it; but you have come back in time. She believed, with the rest of us, that you were dead."

"How did that report get about?"

"It came straight enough, and none of us could help believing it," replied Mr. Duncome. "You were found dead in the hills, with a hole in your head, and were buried there by the men who found you."

"The story was false, as you perceive, and I have no doubt that the lie was invented to serve a purpose. Do you know who started it here? Was it young Wedderburn?"

"Well, really, Mr. Tyrrell, I believe he was the man I first heard speak of it. But he had heard it from somebody else."

"He may have told you that he did; but I believe that he invented it for the purpose of deceiving Alice. If he did, I will make him repent it."

"No you won't, Mr. Tyrrell," rejoined Cessie. "I know that he did get the story from somebody who came from Hard Times, and he only sent there to get the particulars. You won't trouble him, either, because I know that you wouldn't harm my Charley."

"Your Charley?" exclaimed Tyrrell.

"Yes, my Charley. Since you have come back, of course he can't marry Alice, and then I shall claim him, and I will get him, too, and when he is mine, you may rely upon it that I will attend to the business of making him report."

"Is everything to be satisfactory, then?"

"We will make it so. And the first step is for you and Rose to go right along to Zachary Byrd's house with pa and me, and there is no time to lose."

"What! is the marriage to take place so soon?"

"We don't know when it is to come off. Mr. Byrd and Charley keep their own counsel, and Alice don't know any more than we do. But we can't be too soon, and we might be too late."

"Let us go, then."

"John Randolph will take care of your horses. I think he ought to be able to do that much. You and pa run along ahead, and I will come with Rose."

In this order they proceeded, and soon struck into the mountain path that led to Zachary Byrd's cabin.

As they ascended the slope, they saw two horses hitched at the top of the ridge.

"Wait a moment," ordered Miss Duncome. "There are some people before us. I wonder who they are? Suppose you let me go in first with Rose."

"Perhaps I may be needed there at this moment," objected Tyrrell.

"I will see to that. Come, Rose."

And the young lady, holding Rose by the arm, walked to the door of the cabin with her accustomed boldness.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HEADING HIM OFF.

ALTHOUGH Violet seceded from the combination that was intended to compass the capture or death of Montana Nat, he did not go far from his principal, but kept him in sight, and it was well for Rube Hatcher that he did so.

He saw Hatcher's attempt at assassination, which resulted in his being pushed over into the ravine by Rose Tyrrell, and naturally supposed that his tyrant had bid a sudden and final farewell to this world.

Still, he wanted to see the last of Rube, and waited for that purpose until Nat Tyrrell and his sister had left the place.

Then he hastened to the spot where the tragedy had occurred, and looked over the edge of the ravine.

Greatly to his surprise he saw that Hatcher was neither dead nor out of sight.

He saw what Nat Tyrrell would not have failed to observe, if his attention had not been entirely occupied with his sister.

Rube had been caught between the cliff and a tree that grew out of a crevice, and there he was fast, but in no danger of death, provided that he could be extricated from his extremely uncomfortable position.

Violet was a fool. That is to say, he was a silly young fellow, who could not bear to see even a man who had so shamefully tyrannized over him in such a position of peril, without making an effort to help him.

As he looked over the edge of the ravine he called to Rube, and speedily got an answer.

"Come and help me out of this, and be quick about it, before the buzzards get me!"

Violet was as active as a cat, and he quickly climbed down the face of the cliff to where his late partner was stuck fast, and soon freed him from his unpleasant bondage.

After resting awhile Rube Hatcher crawled up to the top, and seated himself there.

He did not thank Violet for the great service that had been rendered him, being too much absorbed in his own affairs to give any thought to that matter.

"This is a little the worst game I ever struck," he remarked. "I never saw the like of it before, and ain't likely to see it again. To miss as fair a shot as you could offer, and then to be hornswoggled by a wooman, gets me for all I'm worth. One thing is certain—I'll never try to draw a bead on Nat Tyrrell again, even if I have him breast to breast. He wasn't born to be killed with powder and ball, and if hemp won't fetch him he's beyond me."

An incautious remark from Violet, to the effect that he had advised against the attempt, turned the aggrieved man's wrath against him suddenly and savagely.

"You did, did you?" demanded Rube. "Yes, you cussed scrub, it was you who got me into this scrape. If you hadn't gone back on me, that girl couldn't have sneaked up to me, and I would have had a sure thing on a second shot. I said I would settle with you, and now is a good time to have it out."

"You leave me alone, Rube Hatcher" said Violet

as the other rose and advanced upon him. "I kin stand a heap, but you mought rub this thing in a leetle too hard—arter w'ot I've done fur you, too. Better leave me alone, I say."

Hatcher replied by dealing the lad a savage blow that knocked him down.

Then he took off his belt and "welted" Violet fiercely and ruthlessly, holding him down by his neck.

Violet made no attempt at resistance, nor did he even whimper, but got up when his tyrant had exhausted himself, and was silent and sullen.

"I reckon you've got a lesson now that will last you," said Rube. "You had better follow me and mind me, after this, without any more fuss. As soon as I find out which way Nat Tyrrell went I will know what to do. If he took the valley trail I will be apt to worry him some."

He started off, and Violet followed him without a word.

Hatcher had lost his rifle and his revolver, but had possessed himself of Violet's pistol, and thus had the lad at his mercy. But, though Violet had no weapon, he scowled at his leader behind his back, and was, doubtless, meditating revenge.

It was easy to pick up the trail of the horse, and they had not gone far when Rube Hatcher became satisfied as to the course that had been taken by Nat Tyrrell and his sister.

"They have gone down the valley trail," he said. "We can cut across the hills and head them off easy enough. Come on, Violet!"

Violet followed him without a word. If he was meditating revenge, he had not yet reached the time or place that suited his purpose.

Last Chance camp was the end of their journey, and as soon as they reached that settlement Rube Hatcher hastened, with Violet at his heels, to the office of the Last Chance Mining Company.

Charley Wedderburn, for whom he inquired, was not there, and Rube was directed to seek him in his room at the hotel.

There the young gentleman was found consulting with a man of clerical appearance, whom Rube at once set down as a "Gospel sharp."

Something in Rube's look told Charley Wedderburn that there was a matter of importance awaiting his attention, and he speedily got rid of his clerical companion.

"If you will have the kindness to step down-stairs and wait for me there, Mr. Hester," he said, "I will join you presently. I have a little matter of business to attend to just now."

Mr. Hester took this rather unceremonious dismissal as a matter of course, and left the room without showing any sign of surprise.

"What is it now, Hatcher?" eagerly inquired young Wedderburn, as he offered seats to Rube and his follower. "Anything up?"

"Up, and out, and doin' well," replied Rube, as if the question had referred to a sick person. "Nat Tyrrell is alive and lively."

This statement caused no remark. It had probably been expected.

"I hope, though," continued Rube, "that the Hard Times business worked well. It was started in good shape."

"That was all right, as far as it went."

"Hain't you got that affair of yours straightened up yet, sir?"

"Not quite—not yet. I say, Hatcher, did you get no other chance to take the man?"

"I will tell you just what sort of a chance I got, and how I come out."

"Be quick about it, then, as I have no time to spare."

Rube Hatcher briefly and forcibly told the story of his attempt upon the life of Nat Tyrrell and its result.

"Do you suppose he has reached the camp?" asked Charley Wedderburn.

"Not yet, I should say. I struck across the hills, and must have headed him off; but he is bound to be here soon."

"There is no time to spare, then, as I said. He must be taken and brought to justice. The men at the mine are not to be relied on, except to help him out if they can; but I had thought of that, and am ready for him. Do you know Red Mike, of Hard Times?"

"Know Red Mike? Better than I know you, sir."

"You will find him at Toler's, with eight or ten men of his crowd. You know what to do, and you mustn't let any of the camp people guess at your business. If you don't happen to come across Tyrrell on the way, I suppose you will find him at Zach Byrd's cabin. That is the first place he will make for."

These directions were accompanied by a liberal supply of cash, and Hatcher went forth rejoicing, with Violet at his heels.

"There is big money in this, my lad," he said, when they were outside. "You shall have a good share of it, and mebbe that will make you feel a bit better, as you are too sulky to suit me just now. You must quit the sulks, and come right down to business. Do you remember the larrupin' you got?"

"I do," briefly responded Violet.

"I meant that you should. You'll get another if you don't go straight. Come along, now."

When Rube Hatcher reached Toler's saloon, he looked around for Violet; but the lad was no longer at his heels.

He had disappeared.

Rube called him, and made a show of searching for him, but saw nothing of him; and had no time to waste upon him. So he hastened into Toler's to interview Red Mike.

Violet, who had sneaked off behind a shanty and concealed himself under a pile of boards, emerged from his hiding-place, and hurried away.

"You go one way, and I'll go another," he muttered, "and we'll see who gets the larrupin'."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A THREE-HANDED GAME.

CHARLEY WEDDERBURN called up the gentleman whom he had requested to step down-stairs, and Mr. Hester hastened to join him.

"I hope," said he, "that the business which interrupted you will not interfere with the business we were speaking of."

"Not at all," answered the young man. "It will

hurry it up rather than hinder it. But I must admit, Mr. Hester, that I am in rather a queer fix, and I am going to depend upon you to help me out."

"How so?"

"The fact is that the girl I am engaged to marry met another man a while ago, and was foolish enough to fall in love with him. He was a man of very bad reputation, and shortly after that unpleasantness occurred he killed my uncle and ran away. Then we heard that he was dead, and my engagement was renewed. Just now I have learned that he is alive and has returned to this settlement. Of course he will be arrested and tried, and possibly hung; but there is a complication that ought to be avoided for the sake of the young lady, to say nothing of myself."

"Just so, Mr. Wedderburn. Out of consideration for the young lady, you think the marriage ought to come off immediately. I admire what I could almost call your self-sacrifice."

"It is not that, Mr. Hester; but the business ought to be settled as soon as possible, and if you will put it through quick you shall have a fee of fifty dollars."

"No large fee is needed to prompt me to do my duty," replied the clergyman. "This seems to be a case of emergency, and I will do my best."

"Very well, sir; let us ride up to Mr. Byrd's."

Rube Hatcher had hastened to Toler's saloon, where he found a number of men seated and standing around, in the enjoyment of present and the expectation of future drinks.

They were the delegation from Hard Times, headed by Red Mike, a well-known tough citizen of that locality.

Rube was at once recognized by them, and he proceeded to satisfy their expectations by inviting them up to the bar to poison themselves at his expense.

As soon as they were sufficiently loaded, he fired them off.

That is to say, he whispered to Red Mike, who gave a signal to his gang, and they all left the saloon.

"I'm keen to bet that that's some high old devilmint on hand," muttered the bar-keeper, as he watched the exit of his rough customers.

Rube led them to a quiet spot outside of the camp, where he surprised them with this startling bit of news:

"Montana Nat is alive, and has come back here!"

The comments that followed showed a state of feeling that was anything but friendly to Montana Nat.

"As he is the murderer of Mark Wedderburn," continued Rube, "he must be attended to, and Charley Wedderburn is willing to pay well for the job. He told me to find you and get you to help me take him."

"Dead or alive, hey?" remarked Red Mike.

"Dead or alive, of course. But powder and lead won't kill him. That's been tried a plenty. Hemp is the only stuff that will settle him."

"That's right into my hand, Rube. Thar ain't nothin' would suit me better than to string up that high-steppin' galoot. Reckon we kin do it?"

"It looks as if there ought to be enough of us to manage one man."

"Jest so, though Nat Tyrrell is a tough subject to tackle. Whar'll we find him, Rube?"

"Follow me, and I will put you right onto him."

Violet had been keeping track of his late chief.

Since he had mustered up courage enough to run away from Rube Hatcher, he was seriously meditating a plan for getting even with his tyrant.

When he saw Rube come out of Toler's saloon and seek a quiet spot for a caucus with Red Mike and his gang, he made up his mind as to what he had to do, and perceived that it must be done immediately.

"I hain't got that larrupin' yet," he muttered, "and if I'm half as smart as I reckon I am, I ain't likely to git it."

He started off at a keen run, heading direct for Last Chance Mine.

It was at a considerable distance from the camp, and when he reached it he was tired and out of breath.

Fortunately, he was met at the mouth of the mine by Vermont, who wondered what was the matter with the forlorn-looking tramp who was exhausting himself in the effort to get there in a hurry.

"What's up, youngster?" demanded the new superintendent. "What sort of a hurricane blew you here in that shape?"

"Montana Nat!" gasped Violet.

"Montana Nat? Well,

here's a shooter that will serve your turn, I reckon. Come on, now! If you have told the truth you have done a good stroke of work for yourself."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ALMOST A MARRIAGE.

ZACHARY BYRD was in his cabin with Alice. The girl was seated in a low chair, looking out at the open door, where there was a glorious view of mountain scenery, and through which the sweet breath of summer stole into the house.

But the beauties of the outside world and the delights of the season did not touch her.

She was pale and sad and silent, and her weary, listless look told of her utter hopelessness in mind and heart.

Her father stood near the door and frequently looked out with an eager and impatient gaze.

"Now, Alice," he was saying, "you will soon be safely married, and then all our troubles will be ended."

"Will they?" she wistfully replied. "It seems to me that mine will only be again begun."

"If you can't be happy with such a husband as Charley Wedderburn, I don't know how you could expect to be happy."

"I do not expect it now," she meekly answered.

Then, rousing herself, she sharply put a question of her own:

"Who brought the news of Mr. Tyrrell's death?"

"Why, Alice, you have been told all about that. Two miners who were on a prospecting tramp found his body out in the hills, with a bullet-hole in the head. He seemed to have been dead several days, and it was a shocking sight. He had many enemies, as you know, and probably he was followed and waylaid and shot down."

"I wish I could have seen these miners. I do not believe that he was shot to death. No bullet could kill him."

"That is nonsense, Alice. There can be no doubt that he is dead, and you must not think of him any more, least of all on your wedding-day."

"Is this my wedding-day?" asked Alice, in a tone that did not indicate any pleasing anticipations.

"Of course it is. Charley Wedderburn has found a traveling preacher, and will bring him up here shortly, and that business will soon be settled. Here comes Sally to stand up with you."

Sally Mapes, who had been ascending the slope, reached the cabin in time to hear the last remark, but did not answer it until she had walked in and taken off her hat.

Then her protest was direct and forcible.

"Not much!" said Sally. "I am here to say that it is a sin and shame that the poor girl should be dragged into this marriage, and that I'm against it, tooth and toenail."

"Here's news again," replied the old man. "When did this notion strike you? Who has had hold of you to-day, I would like to know?"

"Nothin' mean or bad has had hold of me, Zach Byrd, you may bet your life."

"You have no right to oppose the marriage, Sally Mapes. Charley Wedderburn is now the richest young man in the mines."

"That for his money!" exclaimed Sally, as she snapped her finger and thumb. "It won't keep Alice from bein' mis'able."

"Sally Mapes, unless you learn to control that tongue of yours, you will have to leave my house."

"I can do that easy enough. I don't want to stay in your house. I will have a house of my own before long, and a fine house, too, and Alice will be welcome there, and she won't be worried. I want to be turned loose, Zach Byrd. I have worked for you and have fought for you, and have done everything I could do to make you and this dear child comfortable and happy, and I never thought that it would all come to this."

Then the strong woman broke down and fell to sobbing like a child.

"What does it matter now, Sally?" soothingly asked Alice.

"It matters everythin'. What does Charley Wedderburn want to marry you for, when he knows that you don't care a straw for him, and when there is another girl who is right fond of him, and has got plenty of money to back her, and it's as good a family to marry into as he can ask, if I do say it as shouldn't?"

Zachary Byrd's face was red with wrath.

"Hush your clatter!" he angrily ordered. "Here comes Charley with the preacher, and I do wish, Alice, that you would try to brighten up a bit."

Charley Wedderburn came riding up the ridge, accompanied by a mounted stranger, and the two hatched their horses and entered the cabin.

"Here we are, Mr. Byrd and ladies," said the young man, with a cheerful greeting, though it was somewhat eager and strained.

"This is the Rev. Mr. Hester, who is on a traveling tour, and has kindly consented to stop here and perform a marriage ceremony for me and my charming Alice."

Mr. Hester looked like a clergyman of some sort, and doubtless he was a clergyman; but his appearance was not at all attractive either to Alice or to Sally, both of whom acknowledged his bows and smiles quite coldly.

It was quite otherwise with Zachary Byrd.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Hester," said the old man. "It is lucky for us that you happened along just at this time."

"You seldom have a wedding up here in the hills, I suppose," replied the clergyman. "I am quite rusty in the marriage business, I must confess. It is so long since I have married a couple that I hardly remember the service; but I can worry through it, no doubt, after a fashion."

"We are easy to suit," said Charley Wedderburn. "So long as the marriage is legal, we won't complain of the lack of fancy touches."

"Is this the young lady?" inquired Mr. Hester. "I wish her joy."

There was no joy in Alice's face as she rose from her chair and stood with her two hands on its back, pale, sad, and the mere shadow of her former self.

"Your wish is as kind, sir, as it is unavailing," she answered. "I hope it is something more than a

form. If you please, I would like to ask you a question before you proceed with your ceremony."

"Certainly, my dear young lady. I will be happy to answer you."

"I want to say, sir, that I promised to marry this gentleman some time ago. He wished it, and my father wished it, and I did not object. After I had made that promise I saw some one who was far more to me than Mr. Wedderburn was, and I felt that it would not be right for me to keep the promise."

"What is the use, Alice, of raking up that matter?" interrupted Charley. "I know that you had a fancy for Tyrrell; but I have forgiven you."

"Have you been so kind?" she replied, with a slight tinge of sarcasm in her tone.

"And he is dead, you know, and we had better let that affair drop."

"For my part," said the old man, "I think that he is well out of the way, though I don't deny that he had some good points."

"Will you not allow me to ask my question?" inquired Alice. "They tell me that he is dead, Mr. Hester; but I confess that my heart is buried with him. Have I a right to marry under such circumstances?"

The clergyman's face flushed, and he appeared to be embarrassed; but he knew that his fee would be a liberal one, and he speedily pulled himself together.

"There seems to be a complication, but no visible obstruction," he replied. "You have a legal right to marry, of course. As for other considerations, they are out of my province—quite out of my province."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Alice, with a wondering stare at him. "I supposed that you, as a minister of the Gospel, cared for the souls of men and women. I believe that, according to the marriage service, I must promise to love Mr. Wedderburn. Will it be right to make such a promise if I do not believe that I can keep it?"

"You must surely know, my dear young lady, that the promise to which you refer is regarded pretty much as a matter of form—quite a matter of form, I assure you. It is said, too, that the love that comes after marriage is apt to be the best and the most lasting."

"If it is only a matter of form, sir, why—then—I thank you for telling me."

"We are losing time," impatiently muttered Charley.

"I am glad, Alice," said Mr. Byrd, "that you are satisfied at last, and now the marriage ceremony will proceed. Mr. Wedderburn, you may remain where you are with the bride. I will stand at your side, and Sally may stand by Alice."

Charley Wedderburn had taken Alice's unresponsive hand as she stood there; but Sally Mapes did not stir.

"Not I!" she stoutly replied. "I don't mix in no such mess—not as long as I keep my conscience."

"Then you may go off and sulk by yourself," angrily rejoined the old man.

"I won't do that, neither."

This was another complication, and a rather unpleasant one; but Mr. Hester smilingly pushed it aside.

"We will dispense with forms and preliminaries," said he, "and I will merely put the question which my duty compels me to ask. If there is any person present who knows of any just and lawful cause why these two should not be joined in the bonds of matrimony, let him speak now, or forever after hold his peace."

Zachary Byrd had closed the door when Charley Wedderburn and the clergyman came in; but it was opened from without just then, and Celery Duncome entered, leading Rose Tyrrell.

"We have come to the wedding," said Miss Duncome, "though nobody was polite enough to ask us."

Sally Mapes at once seized upon Rose, folding her in her arms, and Alice, breaking from Charley Wedderburn's grasp, covered her with tears and kisses.

The preacher was astonished, Zachary Byrd was bewildered, and Charley was badly upset.

"You poor dear child!" exclaimed Sally. "Where have you been? When did you get back? How did you come here?"

Rose made no reply. She seemed to be dazed again, or the warm welcome of her friends overcame her.

"It is enough that you are here," said Alice. "God himself has taken care of you and brought you back to us. I only wish you could have found your brother and brought him with you."

"He is here!" said Miss Duncome.

She threw open the door, and in walked Nat Tyrrell, followed by Mr. Duncome and John Randolph.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MONTANA NAT'S EXTREME PERIL.

THE arrival of Nat Tyrrell was a thunderbolt to a portion of the party assembled in Zachary Byrd's cabin; to others it was a sunburst.

Alice, with a joyful cry, threw herself into his arms.

Sally Mapes folded Rose more closely in her embrace.

Mr. Hester looked bewildered, as if the complications had become too serious to be easily pushed aside.

Zachary Byrd, who had believed the story of Tyrrell's death, was stricken dumb.

Charley Wedderburn, who had reasons of his own for not believing that story, looked beyond Jack and out of the door, as if expecting somebody.

Miss Duncome surveyed the scene calmly and with evident satisfaction.

The preacher was the first to find his tongue.

"Who is this man?" he asked, a little haughtily.

"I heard you talking just now," replied Nat, turning his dark eyes upon the questioner. "You wanted a reason why this woman should not be joined to that man. I can give you a reason, and it is one which she and I will make good. It is because she does not love that man; because she belongs to me, and because she has been shamefully imposed upon and lied to for the purpose of bringing about the marriage. That is cause enough for us two, whatever you may say."

"They told me that you were dead," said Alice, and she wept tears of joy upon his breast. "You must never leave me again."

Zachary Byrd then found his tongue. It was a difficult situation for him, but his duty seemed to be plain enough.

"Alice, come away from that man!" he harshly ordered.

Alice did not come away, and Nat Tyrrell answered for her.

"You need not be troubled, Mr. Byrd. This change in the programme, strange as it may seem, is not likely to deprive you of any dollars."

"I can't say that I am glad that you have come back here," replied the old man, "though I am glad that you are not dead, as a mistaken report had made us believe."

"Perhaps that report was not so much a mistake, Mr. Byrd, as a lie, and I think I can put my finger on the source of the lie."

"Easy, there, Mr. Tyrrell," interrupted Celery.

"The less we have of that sort of thing the better for all of us."

"Your wish is my law at present, Miss Duncome," he politely responded.

Then Charley Wedderburn, who had not ceased to gaze in the direction of the mountain path, ventured to lift his voice.

"The law should come in another shape," said he. "Mr. Byrd, and all of you, that man is a murderer, as you all well know. He killed my uncle in cold blood. He is a criminal and an outlaw. Will nobody arrest him?"

"Suppose you make the attempt," quietly suggested Nat.

"I will at least see that the business is attended to properly."

"What do you mean?" suddenly demanded Tyrrell, scenting danger in the young man's words and look.

In the doorway, as if he had risen out of the ground, appeared Rube Hatcher, closely followed by a number of rough-looking men.

"Here he is!" shouted Rube. "Seize the murderer!"

The action preceded the word, and as he spoke he flung himself upon Tyrrell from behind.

Nat instinctively jerked himself away and tried to draw his revolver.

He would have freed himself from the grasp of Hatcher had it not been for the clinging arms of Alice, which he could not treat roughly, and the next moment Rube's followers had piled upon him.

In the struggle they dragged him outside, where they threw him on the ground, and tied his arms behind his back, and disarmed him. Then they let him rise to his feet.

Zachary Byrd stared at the men, who were strangers to him, but made no effort to resist or assist them, and Charley Wedderburn surveyed the scene with a look of triumph.

Rose and Alice pushed their way out of the house, and tried to reach Tyrrell as he rose.

"Is it you, Rube Hatcher?" he said, as he looked around. "Who put you up to this game, you sneaking villain?"

"That assassin here!" exclaimed Rose. "Has he risen from the dead?"

Alice made her way to the door, and threw her arms about his neck, but was rudely pushed away, and her father forcibly led her aside.

"You thought you had got rid of me, did you?" replied Hatcher. "But I wasn't so easy to kill. It is my turn now, Nat Tyrrell, and you are going to be strung up in short order."

As he displayed a rope ready noosed, Rose screamed and fell in a swoon; but the faithful Sally was there to support her and care for her.

Alice, endowed with new strength and energy, struggled in the grasp of Zachary Byrd.

"Let him go, you cowards!" she screamed. "You shall not have him!"

"Be quiet, Alice," said the old man, as he held her firmly. "You will harm yourself more than you can help him."

"Father, do you mean to look quietly on and see the murder of a man who has saved your life and mine?"

"I don't mean to, for one," replied Abijah Duncome, as he began to pull off his coat. "This is a righteous cause, and I mean to sail in."

"Attend to old Pork-and-beans," Hatcher quietly remarked to a red-bearded man at his side.

The capitalist from Massachusetts was a little too deliberate. He was seized when his coat was half off, and the sleeves of the garment were used to pinion him.

Rube Hatcher's followers had drawn their pistols, though there was nobody to intimidate but John Randolph and the women.

"This is a brave deed you have done, you slinking curs," said Nat Tyrrell, "and it will be like you to boast of it hereafter. If I could be free for five minutes, you would scatter like a pack of coyotes."

"You would whip a dozen of us, would you?" replied Hatcher. "That blow is a little too big, even for you. But you ain't free, Nat Tyrrell, and you sha'n't be. No fear of that. As you boast that powder and lead can't kill you, we will see if you are proof against the power of hemp."

He dropped the noose over Tyrrell's head, tightened it around his neck, and gathered up the rope in his hands

"Wait a moment!" implored the preacher, rousing himself to the responsibilities of his position. "At least let me speak to him and pray for him."

"Don't trouble yourself, my ministerial friend," coldly replied Nat. "You were ready to desecrate the solemn sacrament of marriage, and you are not fit to pray for me. I am not afraid to die, though I hate to be butchered by a pack of cowardly wolves."

"String him right up!" shouted Rube Hatcher, as he angrily snatched at the rope he held. "We are losing time here, and who knows what may happen?"

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

NEAR a corner of the cabin grew a dwarfed and distorted old post-oak, from which a scraggy but stout branch projected at a convenient height from the ground.

Nat Tyrrell was led to the tree, and was stationed under the branch.

He looked around, but not for help. He could not expect that, and his pale but determined face showed that he was prepared for the worst and ready to meet his fate.

His glance rested on Alice, who was struggling in her father's grasp, and he smiled upon her; but it was a sad smile, which could give her no encouragement at such a time.

Celerity Duncome had picked up a stone; but it was immediately taken from her.

Charley Wedderburn was silent, pale and gloomy, but showed no sign of relenting.

Mr. Hester was astonished, shocked and bewildered, but seemed to think that he had exhausted his efforts on the side of peace and mercy.

Abijah Duncome was securely held, and Zachary Byrd appeared to be struggling with his own emotions, as well as with his daughter.

Rube Hatcher looked up at the post-oak, and measured Nat Tyrrell with his eyes.

The branch was high enough to hang the victim, but too high for him to reach it from the ground.

He looked about for something to stand on, and his glance struck John Randolph, who was standing there alone, his eyes and mouth wide open, and trembling with fear.

"Bring that darky here!" he ordered.

John Randolph was dragged forward howling, and begging them not to hang him.

"Hush your noise, you black idiot!" shouted Hatcher. "You ain't worth hangin', and nobody wants to hurt you. Kneel down here, you fool, and hump your back, so that I can stand on it and pass the rope over the branch."

"Let me go, father!" cried Alice, as she vainly strove to free herself. "They must not kill him!"

"Don't you dare to murder him!" shouted Mr. Duncome, whose struggle was equally fruitless. "You shall suffer for this, every one of you, if there is any law in the land."

Rube Hatcher forced John Randolph down upon the ground, making him assume the position that he was desired to take, and mounted upon his back, with the fatal rope in his hand.

He was about to pass it over the branch, when the darky dropped from under him and rolled over, and he also fell to the ground.

"Curse the black nuisance!" exclaimed Hatcher, as he kicked John Randolph again and again, and the darky crawled away, howling with pain and fear.

"Fling the rope over the branch, Rube, and we'll run him up," said the red-bearded man. "What's the use of foolin'?"

Rose Tyrrell, lying on the ground with her head in the lap of Sally Mapes, had been slowly regaining consciousness.

Just then she started up, and stared at Nat.

"Brother! brother!" she screamed, as she ran to him.

Before she could be prevented she jerked the rope from his neck, threw it upon the ground, and stamped on it.

The next instant she was seized and held; but Sally Mapes and Celerity Duncome ran to her assistance, followed by Alice, who had broken loose from her father's grasp, probably because he was unwilling to restrain her any longer.

"That's right, Rose!" shouted Alice. "They sha'n't hang him!"

And she proved herself a very tiger to the men who sought to control her.

"Curse the meddling women!" exclaimed Rube Hatcher. "Knock them in the head!"

"You sha'n't do that," said Zachary Byrd, as he stepped forward to protect them.

But his efforts were useless. Though the women were not knocked in the head, they were effectually prevented from further interference, while Nat Tyrrell strove in vain to burst his bonds.

As Rube Hatcher turned to finish his task he found himself confronted by Violet, who had sneaked unnoticed into the heart of the crowd, and whose face wore a most conciliatory grin.

"Hello, scalawag!" was Rube's greeting. "How did you happen to turn up?"

"Hope I ain't too late," answered Violet, with a broader grin.

"No, you ain't too late; but I'd like to know what you've been at. As you're here, hand me up that rope. Don't be so slow about it, you or'nary hound!"

Violet was indeed very slow and stupid. As he fumbled clumsily with the rope, even Rube Hatcher's sharp eyes did not notice the blade of a knife that peeped out from under his coat sleeve.

There was a yet broader grin on his face as he handed the rope to Rube, who adjusted the noose about Nat Tyrrell's neck, and flung the end over the branch of the post-oak.

Then he and three other men took hold of the rope, and the noose tightened around Tyrrell's neck.

"Look out, Rube!" shouted one of the party who stood near the slope of the ridge. "There's a crowd comin' up!"

"To hell with the crowd!" yelled Rube. "Run him right up!"

They started away with the rope; but it snapped as soon as the strain came upon it, and broke short off at a point near the victim's neck.

Violet's grin seemed to reach from one of his ears to the other.

A storm of oaths burst forth from Rube Hatcher's lips as he examined the rope and plainly saw where it had been cut into with a knife.

He looked around for the culprit, and Violet stood before him.

"It was you, you hound!" he yelled. "You cut the rope!"

In Violet's right hand gleamed a cocked revolver.

"Yes, Rube," he answered. "I did it, and now I'm goin' to do fur you!"

At the word he pulled the trigger, but the pistol missed fire, and Hatcher jumped backward, slipped, and rolled down the ridge.

His comrades could not then assist him, if anything could have served him. The "crowd" of which the red-bearded man spoke had ascended the slope, and demanded their immediate attention.

It was composed of all the men employed in Last Chance Mine, well armed, and headed by old Bob Bringhurst, Vermont, Jim Allen, Bill Branch, and Blackjack.

"What's going on here?" demanded Bringhurst.

"Trying to lynch Nat Tyrrell? Scatter the scoundrels, boys!"

This command was executed easily and without bloodshed, as the would-be lynchers were glad enough to escape without being compelled to fight for their lives.

In a very brief time they had all disappeared, and Nat Tyrrell was a free man, and in the arms of Alice.

"Here's another victim!" roared Abijah Duncome. "Come and untie me, somebody!"

Sally Mapes gladly rendered him that service, and he joined the men of the mine in congratulating Tyrrell upon his escape.

"I thank you, my friends," said Nat. "You were just in time."

"Came mighty nigh bein' too late, though," remarked Abijah Duncome.

"That is true. The rascals would have strung me up, I believe, if this good fellow had not cut the rope."

He pointed to the grinning Violet, who was readily recognized by the men from the mine.

"The lad did more than that," said Vermont. "It was he who came to the mine and gave the alarm, and started us up here in a hurry; but he got ahead of us, and it's lucky he did."

Mr. Duncome and his daughter had put on their glasses, and were curiously inspecting Violet.

"Why, pa, it is our amateur highwayman!" exclaimed Cessie.

"Yes, my dear; but there is good reason to believe that he has reformed."

"I didn't git the larrupin' that Rube Hatcher promised me, anyhow," remarked Violet, "and I reckon he won't never larrup me no more."

"Thar's somebody else who helped to put off that hangin'," said Sally Mapes. "If Rose hadn't jerked away that rope just when she did, the job might have been finished."

"There's John Randolph, too," said Mr. Duncome. "He may not have meant it, but he played his part as well as if he did mean it. John, your good-for-nothin'ness has been of some use for once in your life, and you may get into politics yet."

"I'd rudder stay whar I'm well off," replied John.

"We none of us ever thought any too well of Charley Wedderburn," said Bringhurst; "but we didn't allow that he would go and get up such a game as this. And we would never have thought that you would suffer it, Zach Byrd."

"Mr. Byrd had no hand or voice in it," answered Tyrrell. "As for Charley Wedderburn, I will settle with him. Where is he?"

It was useless to look for him there. He and Mr. Hester had disappeared together.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

THE remark that Nat Tyrrell made concerning Zachary Byrd's connection with the attempted lynching, was doubtless intended to bring about an era of good feeling, and it surely had that effect.

Before the miners left the ridge, the old man brought out a demijohn and some tin cups, and the tin cups were circulated until the demijohn could no longer respond to their demands, and the hearts of the "crowd" were warmed and softened toward the proprietor of the demijohn.

After he had extended his hospitality in that direction, he invited Nat Tyrrell and the others into his house, and requested Sally Mapes to set refreshments before them.

It was a little awkward, to be sure, to establish an era of good feeling under the circumstances; but it was apparent that Alice belonged to Nat, and could never belong to anybody else; so that arrangement had to be taken as a settled fact.

Moreover, the good spirits of Sally and Mr. Duncome and his daughter, to say nothing of the happiness of Alice and Nat, made it comparatively easy for the old man to enter the "ring" and share their satisfaction.

"Of course you know, Mr. Tyrrell," he said, "that I was not at all anxious to see you back here; but I would never have supposed that you could be threatened with any such peril as that from which you have just escaped, and I don't want you to think that I encouraged it or consented to it in any way."

"I have never thought of accusing you of anything of the kind," replied Tyrrell. "For my part I am willing to let bygones be bygones. I think that you made a great mistake, but am ready to overlook it, and I hope that you will try to make the best of a bad bargain, as you see that Alice is bound to become my wife."

"I am content, if not satisfied," answered the old man, "and the wedding shall take place at any time you and Alice may agree upon."

"There will be two weddings, then," interrupted Abijah Duncome. "Two of 'em, if you please. Miss Mapes and I have concluded to hitch horses and double team it through the rest of our j'int lives, and we hope to have plenty of good baked beans and honest brown bread for all our friends. Ain't that so, Sally?"

"You allus speak the truth, Mr. Duncome, and I'm ready to back it up. And I hope Miss Cessie—"

"Don't worry about me, Miss Mapes," replied that young lady. "If I don't bring my affairs out to suit myself, I am not as well acquainted with myself as I suppose myself to be."

"In accepting me as your son-in-law, Mr. Byrd," said Nat, "I am inclined to believe that you need have no fear that your daughter will fall into the ditch of poverty, as it is quite likely that I will be a rich man before long. I have lately struck, with the help of my dear sister, the richest lead that was ever heard of in these hills. If it keeps its promise, I believe it will be worth two of the Last Chance, and I have already named it the New Hope."

He then told the story of his meeting with Rose in the hills, and of the big find he had happened to strike so accidentally or providentially.

"Count me in, Tyrrell!" exclaimed Abijah Duncome. "Take me as a partner, if you want one. If it is a good thing, I will furnish the capital to help you get a fortune out of it."

"I could not ask a better partner," replied Nat. "And now that I have satisfied my friends, as I hope, I have only to get even with my enemies."

"Never mind your enemies, Nat," softly whispered Alice.

There is one, at all events, who needs a lesson, and that is young Wedderburn. I believe it was he who started the false report of my death, and he who sent that crowd of rascals here to lynch me. I must teach him that it is not safe to play such tricks with me."

Cessie Duncome made no reply to this threat, reserving her thoughts and words for another time and another person.

The other time came very shortly, and the other person was Alice Byrd, who was easily induced to persuade Tyrrell to forego his purpose of revenge and leave Charley Wedderburn severely alone.

As for Charley, Miss Duncome had rightly guessed that when he found his marriage with Alice Byrd to be out of the question, he would come to her for consolation.

He came, and she consoled him, and the result was satisfactory to both.

A few days after the attempt at lynching, Miss Duncome called on Alice Byrd when she knew that Nat Tyrrell would be present, and she brought Charley Wedderburn with her.

"Mr. Tyrrell," she said, "I want to make you acquainted with my most particular friend, Charley Wedderburn. He is not the same Charley you used to know, but quite a different Charley. He has been a good fellow at heart all the time, but for a while he has been on the wrong track, and it is only lately that he has got on the right one."

"That is true," said Charley, "and I see it plainly now. You have a right to think badly of me, Mr. Tyrrell, and I can't grumble if you should think you ought to do something; but I am here to say that I knew that my uncle had been guilty of a great sin, and that I suffered my passions to run away with me. It was my infernal obstinacy that was to blame."

Cessie patted him encouragingly on the back.

"An honest confession is good for the soul, Charley," said she, "and I must keep you in the attitude of confession. You don't know how becoming it is to you. Now, Mr. Tyrrell, if you want to kill Charley, you must kill me, too, as I could not survive his loss a moment, and I would prefer that you should begin with me."

Nat of course declared that he had no intention of killing anybody or anything, and shook hands with Charley Wedderburn, while Alice smiled upon the reconciliation.

Thus there were three weddings in the hills, all at the same time and place, and the jubilation at Last Chance camp was something immense.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RUBE HATCHER'S LAST STROKE.

SHORTLY after the three weddings at Last Chance camp had been consummated, and while the parties chiefly interested were presumed to be happy, it was decided by Nat Tyrrell and Abijah Duncome that they should make a journey to the location of the proposed New Hope Mine, to determine the value of the find and settle upon a plan for working the lead.

The capitalist from Massachusetts had such entire faith in Tyrrell's word and his judgment, that he expressed a willingness to provide all the money necessary for the purpose, and proved the truth of his assertions by his acts.

So the expedition that left the camp was a well-appointed one, and of sufficient size for the business in hand, fully provided with horses, food, tools, and all other necessaries.

Charley Wedderburn begged to be allowed to join the party, and Tyrrell, who did not wish that the least shade of ill-feeling should remain, cheerfully granted his request.

As they set out they were loaded with plenty of advice and caution from their respective wives, and Mr. Duncome was plentifully supplied by Sally with baked beans to sustain and inspire him during his absence.

Though the journey was necessarily a difficult one they had an excellent guide in Montana Nat, who led them by the easiest route to the place where he had made the find upon which he was disposed to bank so heavily.

It was near the close of day when they reached the location, and they encamped for the night, with the intention of beginning work early in the morning.

The party that went into camp was composed of the three men who have been named, with Bill Branch and another of the Last Chance miners, and Timothy Sass, otherwise known as Violet, whom Nat Tyrrell had taken into his employment.

An inspection of the camp before night fell caused Tyrrell to take rather more pains with the arrangement of the camp than he would otherwise have taken.

"Somebody has been here," he informed the party — "somebody who must have followed my trail and lighted on my find. My stakes have been changed, and there are tracks of men about here."

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sleep immediately, it was not long before their sonorous breathing told of a journey to the Land of Nod.

Tyrrell kept a sharp lookout, watching in all directions for signs of the mysterious parties who had encroached upon his claim; but there was nothing to be seen or heard.

It was a little after midnight when he determined to turn in.

"There don't seem to be any danger," he said, "and we may as well call the other watch."

"Wait a minute, boss," replied Violet. "Seems to me I hear suthin'."

He surely did hear something the next instant.

It was a shot, and Nat Tyrrell felt himself struck in the side.

The shock and the sudden loss of blood caused him to sink upon the ground, and as he did so several men rushed upon the camp from the cover of the adjoining trees and rocks.

At the sound of the shot the sleepers leaped up, and were at once engaged in a fierce and desperate struggle.

The night was dark and cloudy, but there were rifts in the clouds through which the young moon shone fitfully.

"Rube Hatcher again!" exclaimed Tyrrell, as a moon-gleam lighted up the face of the man who was springing at him.

"Yes, and I've got you foul at last, you murdering hound!" replied his deadly enemy, as he hurried on to complete his work.

But Charley Wedderburn was there before him.

Stepping over Tyrrell's body, he bravely offered his life in defense of the life which he had lately sought to take.

He fired point-blank at Hatcher as he came on; but Rube, though evidently hit, seized him and dashed him down, raising a knife with the intent to plunge it into his breast.

A pistol-shot nearly stunned and blinded them both.

Rube Hatcher was more than stunned, as the entire charge of a chamber of Violet's revolver had entered his head, and he fell over, a dead man.

"Reckon I fixed him that time," muttered Violet, as he and Charley Wedderburn hastened to the assistance of their friends.

Their help was needed, as the others were hard pressed just then.

Abijah Duncome, who had picked up Tyrrell's rifle, and had swung it about with more force than dexterity, was soon stretched helpless on the ground, and Bill Branch and the other miner were fighting desperately against odds.

Nat Tyrrell raised himself on his side and drew a revolver, and his wound did not prevent him from firing quickly and with good aim.

This assistance, with the attack of Charley Wedderburn and Violet, struck a panic into the remaining assailants, who sought the cover of the forest and the darkness as speedily as possible.

The party from Last Chance, when they were able to look about and take account of damages, had cause to congratulate themselves on being no worse off than they were.

Mr. Duncome had been stunned, but he protested that his head could well have borne a harder blow, and Tyrrell's wound proved to be the only serious injury sustained by the party.

He was badly hurt—there was no doubt of that—and the loss of blood had weakened him greatly; but Bill Branch was a pretty good rough surgeon, and he dressed the wound nicely.

Then the question was how Tyrrell should be got home; but he settled it by declaring that he was not to be moved anywhere.

"Just go on with the work," he said. "It will take several days to make a start here, and I am willing to bet the New Hope against a pot of baked beans that by that time I will be strong enough to travel."

The first work done was the burial of Rube Hatcher, and Violet congratulated himself on being at last freed from his tyrant.

"It seems a pity to start the mine with a funeral," remarked Nat; "but we could not well have lost a less useful citizen."

He was ready to go home when the rest of the party were ready, and in the mean time was able to direct the operations of his friends, the specimens that were secured from the ledge causing Abijah Duncome and the miners to stretch their eyes.

The return journey to Last Chance was made leisurely and by easy stages, so that Tyrrell should not be worried or wearied, and Alice was not informed of his injury until he was alone with her and could break the news to her carefully.

The New Hope Mine proved to be fully as valuable as Montana Nat had predicted it would be. It was speedily opened and developed, and was a real bonanza for himself and the capitalist from Massachusetts.

Abijah Duncome transferred his interest in Last Chance to his daughter, who found Charley Wedderburn to be tractable, easy to manage, and altogether an excellent husband.

Rose Tyrrell has not fully recovered her reason, and still has intervals of partial insanity; but she is happy with her brother and Alice, and her bad turns are becoming fewer and milder.

Among the most useful and trusted employees of New Hope Mine is Timothy Sass, commonly known as Violet.

THE END.

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